South Haven Tribune

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November 9, 2025

SH mayor reelected to second term

Brown defeats Hosley by over 200-vote margin

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

BROWN

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Mayor Annie Brown was reelected by constituents Tuesday night, and will begin her second term.

According to unofficial election results from the Van Buren County Clerk's Office, Brown received 860 votes in Tuesday's election against her challenger, Council Member Mary Hosley, who had 617 votes.

"I'm grateful to be reelected, and I'm thrilled to be able to work with a new city council that includes (Council members) Eddie Polk, Tom Caps and David Flack," Brown said Wednesday. "I think the voters have spoken and we will be moving forward in January with civility, respect and trust. We'll be continuing our work with the Overton site housing, repairing our streets and sidewalks and infrastructure and supporting our downtown businesses and industries."

Brown, 64, has lived in South Haven since 1985, but is originally from Hillman, Mich.

She has served on the housing commission and the parks commission. She is on the board of the South Haven Area Emergency Services, is the secretary on the Van Buren County Senior Services board and is also vice president of the United Christian Services of Van Buren County.

The general election boasted a larger voter turnout than the August primary. During the primary election, the mayoral candidate field was narrowed to two officials.

In August, Brown received the most votes for mayor at 477, followed by Hosley with 355 votes. Newcomer Joshua Lemmer was ousted from the mayoral race with 351 votes in August.

"I want to thank everyone who supported my election," Brown said.

Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104

Julie Newell / Tribune Editor

Chris Van Hekken has been named the new recreation director for South Haven, which includes upkeep of the city's parks like Pilgrim Haven Park.

An eye for recreation

Van Hekken shares passion for recreation in SH

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — After spending seven years as the recreation director for the city of Grand Haven, Chris Van Hekken has taken on the challenge of building a recreation program in South Haven from the ground up.

The position was created in collaboration with the city and the South Haven High School, which stems from a recreation millage in August of 2024 to provide funds to be raised for community recreation for all ages.

Born and raised in Howell, Mich., Van Hekken now lives in Holland, Mich.

Van Hekken recently sat down with South Haven Tribune Editor Julie Newell to discuss his life and goals as the new recreation director.

■ **Where did you go to college?**

I have a bachelor's from Aquinas College and a master's from Belhaven University.

■ **What did you study?**

Business administration is my bachelor's and athletic administration is my master's.

■ **Why did you decide to go into that area of study?**

I had been coaching for a number of years and I had a real interest in potentially working in college athletics and decided to pursue my master's to give myself a better opportunity. Through the course of study, I realized how much I liked other aspects of sports management and recreation happened to fall into one of those categories.

So, it wasn't my intention originally, to get into recreation, but through my studies for my master's, that's when it became evident I really had a passion for recreation.

■ **What made you decide to take the recreation director position in South Haven?**

Prior to this, I was the recreation director for the city of Grand Haven for a number of years. I've always been fond of the city of South Haven, and I liked the opportunity to have the challenge of kind of coming in and helping develop a recreation department and programs from scratch. I really enjoy building programs and building programs like this and that's what really got my attention.

■ **What are your goals and aspirations as the recreation director?**

Well, my first goal is to meet as many people in the community as I can and really listen to the families and the community leaders; find out what the needs are in this community; find out what people really want to have and to see; and then to start to create those programs. It's a process, but I really think that this city has a lot of opportunity for fantastic recreation, not only for children, but really for adults as well.

That's really my initial goal is just really to hear the people in the community and understand what it is that they want and then work to help develop that and they're a part of that. The families and leaders in this community are a part of that as well. That's what will make a great recreation department.

■ **How are you settling into this new position?**

It's been good. I mean, obviously I'm in a new city, a new job where I didn't know anyone before. But I would say the people that I work with in the high school and the people that I work with in the community – as far as community leaders and the families – that I've met so far have been fantastic. Everyone has been very welcoming. Everyone has been very willing to answer my questions and been willing to sit down and have discussions. So far, it's been going great.

■ **Did you ever imagine you would end up where you are now?**

Five years ago? Probably not. I feel that, in Grand Haven, when I left, it was in a great spot. The rec department was in a good place and I know that I've always had a passion for building programs. I would say, it didn't surprise me that this caught my eye, but I guess I was never really thinking one specific city, for that matter.

■ **Do you have any special hobbies, talents or favorite activities?**

I'm an avid Chicago Bears fan and that's sometimes good, a lot of times bad. My wife and I are pretty avid pickleball players as well. We play a lot and we travel sometimes to warmer climates in the winter to play with friends in Florida. Then we have two children – two adult children – one who is finishing college this year and the other is working for a university in Chicago.

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Polk, Capps win South Haven council seats

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — Voters chose two newcomers for the two contested seats on the South Haven City Council in Tuesday's election.

Eddie Polk won the Ward 1 seat with 264 votes, against Lisa Krupiarz with 226 votes. Thomas Capps won the Ward 2 seat with 270 votes, against Todd Heinrich who had 192 votes.

Dave Flack ran uncontested for the Ward 3 seat.

All three city council member seats carry four-year terms.

Polk, 77, grew up in South Haven and currently serves on the planning commission. Capps, 68, is a fourth-generation resident of South Haven.

Capps said he was very happy with the results of the election.

"I'm looking forward to working with the council," Capps said. "We think that some great people got elected that will get along and the council should be a lot calmer. We hope that we can really achieve some great things here in the next four years, as far as housing and jobs and I think we can do some good things. We've got some people that are motivated and can make some decisions."

Polk could not be reached for comment on his victory Wednesday.

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LMC millage renewals approved by voters

Kubatzke celebrates funding with capital, operating levies

By RALPH HEIBUTZKI
For the Tribune

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Voters gave Lake Michigan College an overwhelming thumbs-up in Tuesday's election for renewing its operating and capital millages.

A 20-year, 0.665-mill renewal of LMC's operating millage – which provides 20 percent of its budget – passed, with 15,189 voting "yes," and 12,391 voting "no," unofficial results from the Berrien County Clerk's Office showed. The levy will stay in place until 2046. Voters last approved it in 2006.

Voters also approved the second proposal, which called for a 50 percent reduction of its capital millage from 0.48 to 0.24 mills, with 15,695 voting "yes," and 11,877 voting "no," results showed.

The college launched the capital millage as a way of funding essential improvements without tapping into its general fund. Voters first passed the measure in 2016, which now runs through 2036.

LMC President Trevor Kubatzke thanked voters for their responsiveness to both proposals, in a statement released after Tuesday's results.

"I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the voters of the LMC District for passing the millage. Your support reflects a continued confidence in the work we do and the vital role our institution plays in our community," he said.

Passing the operating millage renewal was especially important, since it generates an estimated $8.9 million in funding for every

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The Tribune: Celebrating Our 126th Year

OBITUARY

Donita Raymond

Feb. 27, 1965 – Oct. 28, 2025

Donita passed on Tuesday, Oct. 28, 2025, surrounded by her loved ones. Donita was born Feb. 27, 1965, in Grand Rapids, Mich. to Carol and Don Raymond.

Donita was a caregiver to the elderly; she loved what she did and did it for many years. She was also an avid animal lover, especially to cats. She loved the water; there were many summer days spent at the beach.

Although you didn't always see it because she hid it well, she had a kind and giving heart. Donita loved her family, especially her grandchildren and will be truly missed by them all.

Surviving is her mother, Carol Adams; daughters, Ashley (Mario) Fonseca, Rochelle (RJ) Simmons; grandchildren, Kassidee, Kaelyn, Rowan, Kensley, Josh, Kyle, Adrianna and Skyler; along with many other living relatives.

She is preceded in death by her father, Don Raymond; son, Joshua Griggs; grandparents, Jane and Bob Willerton; and stepfather, Ralph Adams.

Memorial services were held Nov. 7 at Geneva Township Hall.

Southwest Michigan housing market gets sales boost in September

By TONY WITTKOWSKI
For the Tribune

The Southwest Michigan housing market saw an increase in sales and homes sold for September.

At the end of the peak selling season for this year, house sales increased by 3 percent in September 2025 from the same month of 2024.

According to a report from the Southwestern Michigan Association of Relaters, selling prices in September continued to rise and set records in the year-over-year comparison that reaches back to 2006.

The number of houses sold in September increased 20 percent from last year, by another 50 homes.

The inventory of houses for sale dropped by eight houses from the same time in September 2024 (990 vs. 998). This slight change reduced the supply level to 5.9 from 6.2-months at the end of August. For comparison, in September 2010, there were 3574 houses for sale for a 17.3-months supply of houses for homebuyers.

The average selling price in September 2025 rose 15 percent to $459,203 from $400,535 in September 2024. Year-to-date, the average selling price grew 14 percent to $425,115 from $371,896.

The median selling price in September 2025, $315,000, increased 11 percent from $284,750 in September 2024. Year-to-date, the median selling price increased by 9 percent.

The total dollar volume in September 2025 increased 8 percent compared to September 2024. The year-to-date total dollar volume in 2025 grew 3 percent.

The number of bank-owned or foreclosed homes as a percentage of all transactions in Southwest Michigan remained at 1 percent just as it was in August. There were four houses included.

The previous lowest percentage was 0 percent in September 2022, and the highest percentage in September was 37 percent in 2009.

The Freddie Mac mortgage rate in September was 6.30, up from 5.69 in August for a 30-year conventional mortgage. A year ago, the rate was 6.08.

Contact: twittkowski@TheHP.com, 932-0358.

FBI names third man accused of planning Halloween terror attack

By ISABELLA VOLMERT
Associated Press

LANSING — Investigators say a third Michigan man is now facing charges in a plot to stage a terror attack on Halloween. He traveled to Cedar Point, an amusement park in Ohio, to scout the location, they said.

Ayob Nasser, 19, was arrested Wednesday. He is accused of participating in the planning of a possible attack on LGBTQ+ bars in suburban Detroit that was inspired by the Islamic State, federal authorities have said.

Also on Wednesday evening, acting U.S. Attorney Alina Habba in New Jersey said in a video posted to social media that her office had charged two more people "connected" to the alleged plot. Court documents detailing the charges were not immediately available.

Nasser, his brother Mohmed Ali and Majed Mahmoud are charged with conspiracy to provide material support and resources to a designated terrorist organization and receiving and transferring guns and ammunition for terrorism, according to court documents.

Mohmed Ali and Majed Mahmoud were arrested Friday. Investigators say two minors, identified only as Person 1 and Person 2 in court documents, were also involved in the discussions.

"We will not stop. We will follow the tentacles where they lead. We will continue to stand guard with the FBI against terrorism," said U.S. Attorney Jerome F. Gorgon Jr. said in a statement.

It was unclear whether Nasser has an attorney. An attorney representing Nasser in an unrelated civil lawsuit, Hussein Shadi Bazzi, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

According to court records, Nasser is one of two people being sued in federal court by the makers of the popular video game Fortnite. The two are accused of making thousands of fake "bot" accounts that earned "tens of thousands of dollars in unearned payments."

Two attorneys representing Ali and Mahmoud declined to comment when reached by phone Wednesday evening, and both said they are reading through an amended 93-page complaint filed in federal court. One of the attorneys, Amir Makled, over the weekend seemed to wave off the allegations, saying they were the result of "hysteria" and "fear-mongering."

Ali and Mahmoud made brief appearances in federal court Monday and will remain in custody at least until a Nov. 10 detention hearing.

FBI agents had surveilled the group for weeks, even using a camera on a pole outside a Dearborn house, according to the court filing. Investigators also got access to encrypted chats and other conversations and scoured social media posts.

According to the court filing, investigators searched the residences of the group, an auto repair shop operated by Ali and Nasser's family and a storage unit rented by Ali. Authorities found AR-15-style rifles, ammunition, loaded handguns and GoPro cameras, as well as tactical vests and backpacks.

Five cellular devices were also seized, the FBI said.

Investigators said that Ali, Mahmoud and one of the minors, Person 1, visited bars in Ferndale, a northern suburb of Detroit, despite all being under the legal drinking age. The city attracts tens of thousands of people to its annual Pride parade.

Nasser and Person 2 traveled twice in September to "an amusement park in the Midwest, approximately three hours from Dearborn, Michigan," court documents say, citing phone records and surveillance footage. Investigators say a computer at the home of Nasser and Ali revealed that someone had searched "is it crowded on halloweekend" at the amusement park.

Cedar Point, an amusement park near Cleveland, Ohio, hosted special Halloween hours this past month. Tony Clark, a spokesperson for Cedar Point, confirmed that individuals connected with the plot visited its property, and the park assisted the FBI with its investigation.

"Together with additional third-party experts, the park took immediate and appropriate action to ensure the continued safety of all on property," Clark said.

In the new court filing, investigators said a group chat between the men included a Halloween attack with repeated references to pumpkins and pumpkin emojis. In the group chat, one of the unnamed conspirators wrote "American Jewish Center," and Nasser responded "pumpkin sounds good now."

The court filing says Person 1 regularly consulted the father of a "local Islamic extremist ideologue" about when to commit a "good deed."

Phone records also showed members of the group looked up information on various mass killings, including the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting and the deadly 2025 New Orleans truck attack.

Mike Householder / AP

FBI agents gather outside a home in a Dearborn neighborhood on Friday, Oct. 31.

LMC

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day items, like instruction time and classroom space, as Kubatzke, his management team, and LMC board members have noted.

"This vote is an investment in the future of our students, our workforce, and our region," Kubatzke said. "It affirms our shared commitment to providing accessible, high-quality education and training that transforms lives and strengthens our local economy. Thanks to your continued support, Lake Michigan College will remain a strong and innovative resource for everyone in our community."

Both measures jumped to early leads from the beginning, that continued to grow, as the vote counting continued Tuesday evening.

The operating millage renewal passed by a 55-44 percent margin, while the capital millage reduction did slightly better, winning approval by a 56-43 percent margin, results showed.

But the persistence of critical statements aired against the millages on social media, prompted LMC officials to address the claims at two recent board meetings, and do public presentations – such as the Benton Harbor City Commission, for example.

The Southwest Michigan Association of Realtors and Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber of Commerce both endorsed the millages, with the Berrien County GOP standing out as the sole major organization to go on record against them.

In response, LMC cited studies demonstrating its overall economic value and impact, including one by Lightcast that estimated the college's contribution to the local economy at $371 million annually – via graduate earnings, college operations, and reduced service costs, as Board President Joan Smith noted last week.

"Community colleges work like public safety, libraries and roads – everyone benefits. We all depend on skilled nurses, police officer, teachers and technicians trained at LMC – whether we visit campus or not," she said.

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Photos by Don Campbell / For the Tribune

Benton Harbor resident Deontae Rogers collects donations as a Salvation Army bell ringer on Tuesday afternoon at the new Hobby Lobby store in Fairplain Plaza in Benton Township.

The sound of giving

Salvation Army begins bell ringing for the season

By LOUISE WREGE
For the Tribune

Now more than ever, The Salvation Army is asking for help to meet the needs of people in Southwest Michigan through its Red Kettle Campaign.

"Bell ringing funds help us to continue to purchase food for our food pantry, especially this month, where there's a lot of unknowns for families who are SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients," said Lt. Melissa Bledsoe, who leads the Benton Harbor Salvation Army with her husband, Lt. Mario Bledsoe. "It's more important than ever to wrap our arms around our neighbors in need."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the program, had planned to freeze SNAP payments starting Nov. 1 because of the federal government shutdown. However, due to recent court rulings, the SNAP program is expected to be partially funded in November using money in a contingency fund.

Mario Bledsoe said bell ringers started manning kettles earlier this week, with more places to be added throughout the month.

"Anything that we raise here will help us through the entire year," he said. "Our goal this year is $175,000, and we're hoping to exceed that, because the more money we receive, the more we can help."

"This is a very giving community."
MELISSA BLEDSOE

Benton Harbor resident Deontae Rogers collects donations as a Salvation Army bell ringer this past week at the new Hobby Lobby store in Fairplain Plaza in Benton Township.

He said their goal last year was $162,000, and they raised $330,000.

"This is a very giving community," Melissa Bledsoe said.

Besides food, she said the money raised will help pay for the Salvation Army's Men's Shelter, utility and rent assistance, a men's closet and youth programs.

In addition, she said they work with other community agencies such as Mosaic to help people get the skills they need to find jobs.

"There are so many good things going on in this community," she said. "It doesn't make sense to reinvent the wheel, but to join forces."

She said food from Feeding America West Michigan helps fill their food pantry.

"We're able to purchase bulk food for a fraction of the cost, which allows us to be able to buy more food and allocate other funds to get things that Feeding America doesn't provide," she said.

The Salvation Army of Benton Harbor covers Van Buren County and the western portion of Berrien County as well. More information on how to donate or volunteer can be found on The Salvation Army – Benton Harbor MI Facebook page. People can volunteer to ring the bell at www.registertoring.com.

Benton Harbor resident Deontae Rogers said this is his second year ringing the bell.

"I like it because greeting people, smiling and putting smiles on people's faces – I like that," Rogers said while ringing the bell at Hobby Lobby in Benton Township on Tuesday. "And what we do is we give back to the community – I like that, too."

Bridge the gap

Feeding America West Michigan was already feeling the crunch of higher food costs as more people sought help. Earlier this year, the USDA canceled 32 truckloads of food, which was valued at $856,000, and canceled a local food agreement that allowed Feeding America to buy $1.3 million in food from small Michigan farms.

On Monday, Feeding America launched a Bridge the SNAP Gap emergency food drive.

The campaign aims to fill the gap left by $19 million in lost monthly food assistance for more than 300,000 neighbors in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula, stated a news release from Feeding America West Michigan.

"More than 1.4 million Michiganders rely on SNAP each month. In Feeding America West Michigan's service area alone, that's more than 160,000 households that receive $19.1 million in monthly food assistance," said Ken Estelle, president and CEO of Feeding America West Michigan, in the news release. "With benefits paused, those families now face an urgent need for community support."

A community drop-off event is being held from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday at three locations, including at the Benton Harbor Warehouse at 1488 E. Empire Ave., Benton Harbor. The other locations are in Kentwood and Cadillac.

Feeding America is collecting shelf-stable, high-protein foods to support local pantries and mobile food distributions throughout its 40-county area.

Items can include canned meats (tuna, chicken, salmon), canned fruits and vegetables, peanut butter, beans (canned or dry), canned meals (chili, ravioli, soups), macaroni and cheese, rice, pasta, oatmeal, breakfast bars and cereal.

All donations must be unopened, sealed and within manufacturer expiration dates. Packaging should be free from rust, dents, tears or bulges to ensure food safety.

Every $1 provides five nourishing meals' worth of food to neighbors in need in the community.

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SH council eyes bonds to improve ice rink

City manager proposes in-pad cooling system

By JULIE NEWELL
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven City Council approved a resolution this week to issue bonds for an ice rink improvement project.

"The DDA (Downtown Development Authority) has been recognizing that something has to be done with the ice rink every year," City Manager Kate Hosier said during Monday's meeting. "We haul in many, many yards of gravel, make a bed and then we put out all these coils. We want to make sure that there's no gaps in them or there's no brakes and that takes time."

The project will include constructing a concrete pad with an in-pad cooling system, new paving and resurfacing around the pad including parking areas. This proposed in-pad cooling system will tie in with the new chiller system, Hosier said.

"We have reached out to our bond council and Tickinson Wright, as well as with our financial consultants at MFCI. They were recommending that we publish an intent to bond up to $2.6 (million)," she said.

Hosier said the city is not obligated to borrow that much, but it will ensure that all the increasing costs of the project are covered.

The notice of intent will run for 45 days.

Winterizing boats

During Monday's meeting, the city council approved an agreement with Captain Megan Cairns for wintering the MJ Tallship with the South Haven municipal marina for $1,500. Cairns was the former captain of the Friends Goodwill and currently runs her own tallship tours in St. Joseph.

"We typically have all of our boats out by Oct. 15, but we have had other boats stay in over the winter," Hosier said.

This agreement will be a pilot program with the city's marina for wintering vessels during the late fall, winter and early spring months.

Included in the pilot program, the cost will cover the any electricity needed on site for the vessels. This will allow ships to run necessary onboard electrical needs and allow for the use of bubblers to prevent ice formation.

"This is a trial for us for this year to see if this works out for both her and, of course, the city and see if this is something going forward before we can have additional revenue," Hosier said.

Cairns would be responsible for checking the ship regularly and keeping up with maintenance for the ship.

"As we discussed on the Harbor Commission, they thought because Megan lives here, she wants to have her ship here so she can check on it herself," Council Member Jeff Arnold said. "She can stop by, look at it and not have to go all the way to St. Joe."

A DDA update

DDA Director Suzanne Brock gave a presentation to the city council about updates on what the authority has done over the past year and plans for the future.

Brock said the authority's priority list includes improvements to the Huron Street Pavilion, downtown district beautification, Broadway Streetscape improvements and updates to existing parking/construction of new parking.

Part of the pavilion improvements include electrical upgrades, reconstruction of the ice rinks and repairing the roof.

"We also have downtown district beautification," Brock said. "We know that we need to keep our downtown very vibrant. It really is that catalyst for economic development."

Brock said one of the projects the authority is working on is waste management, specifically for recycling cardboard.

The Broadway Street improvements would include trees, parking, landscaping, bike racks, trash cans and streetlights. Brock said out of the 29 recent business ribbon cuttings, six of them have been in the downtown district.

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LMC to showcase physical therapist degree program

By TRIBUNE STAFF

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Lake Michigan College will introduce its new physical therapist assistant program to the public during an open house next week.

According to a news release, the event will be from 6-7:30 p.m. Nov. 11 at the college's South Haven Campus, where the program is based.

The campus is located at 125 Veterans Blvd., South Haven.

High school students and adults considering training for a career in health care, area health care professionals, and the broader community are invited to meet faculty and staff, learn about the program and entrance requirements, and explore PTA career pathways. The event will include tours of the new lab located on the second floor of the South Haven Campus building.

LMC developed the program to address a critical gap, college officials say.

Southwest Michigan currently has limited physical therapist assistant training options despite strong employer demand. The new offering joins LMC's other health science certificate and degree offerings, which include certified nurse aide, diagnostic medical sonography, medical assisting, nursing, pharmacy technician, phlebotomy and radiologic technologist.

"We saw a clear need. Despite strong demand from local health care employers, there are limited PTA training programs in the region," said LaToya Mason, LMC dean of health sciences, in the release. "Given our experience delivering high-quality, accredited health care programs, this was a natural fit for Lake Michigan College."

Graduates of LMC's physical therapist assistant program earn an associate in applied science degree. Upon program completion, students are eligible to take the National Physical Therapy Examination for licensure, following which they will be ready to work with patients under the supervision of licensed physical therapists in a variety of health care settings.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median pay for physical therapist assistants nationwide is $65,510. Job growth prospects for the field are bright, with an anticipated 22 percent increase in jobs by 2034.

Program candidates will be evaluated through a selective admission process, with 18 students accepted each fall semester. Like many of the college's other health science programs, selection will be competitive and based on grade point average, Test of Essential Academic Skills exam scores, physical therapy observation hours, and qualifying direct patient care experience.

The first cohort of physical therapist assistant students will be admitted to the program in 2027. According to Dr. Susan Tomica, LMC director of the physical therapist assistant program, those interested in applying need to begin planning now.

"Students need to complete 25 credit hours of prerequisite and general education courses before applying for admission to the physical therapist assistant program. People hoping to enter the program can begin taking those classes as soon as the upcoming spring semester to be ready when we open our first application pool in the spring of 2027," Tomica said in the release.

Registration is not required for the open house.

More information about the PTA program can be found at www.lakemichigancollege.edu/academics/health-sciences/pta.

Allegan County Clerk offers free services for veterans

By TRIBUNE STAFF

ALLEGAN — As West Michigan prepares to honor military veterans on Nov. 11, the Allegan County Clerk's office is offering free service for veterans who have been honorably discharged.

According to a news release, one of the services offered by the Vital Records Division is the recording of military discharge papers (DD-214s).

"My office staff and I are extremely grateful for the service and sacrifice of all our constituents who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard," Allegan County Clerk Bob Genetski said in the release.

Veterans can bring their original papers to the clerk's office, where the recording process is quick and secure. Afterward, the original documents are returned and the veteran receives a free certified copy.

Certified copies will be provided at no cost for life to veterans and their designated family members for use in securing benefits such as the GI Bill, VA assistance, or a veteran driver's license designation.

"This service is free and gives veterans and their families peace of mind," Genetski said in the release. "When a veteran passes away, the recorded DD-214 helps funeral homes quickly obtain a gravestone marker from the Veterans Administration. Having that record on file makes things much easier for loved ones left behind."

All DD-214 records are confidential and not accessible to the public.

"The Clerk's Office also issues the Allegan County Veterans ID Card, which allows veterans to receive discounts and benefits at participating businesses throughout Allegan County and across the U.S.," the release stated.

To obtain the ID card, veterans must have their DD-214 recorded with the clerk's office and present a valid state-issued photo ID. There is no charge for the card.

For more information, contact the Allegan County Clerk's Office at 269-673-0450 or visit 113 Chestnut Street, Allegan, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

The county offices will be closed on Veterans Day.

South Haven to make sidewalk repairs downtown

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — South Haven Concrete has been contracted by the City of South Haven to repair the sidewalk in several locations downtown on Phoenix Street.

According to a news release, the repairs will be where the sidewalk has deteriorated or settled over time causing trip hazards for pedestrian traffic.

"The contractor is currently saw cutting and removing areas on the south side of Phoenix starting at Kalamazoo Street and working their way east," the release stated. "Most of the repairs need to be done to the colored exposed aggregate concrete which is mainly located in areas that are not travel paths."

Access to the stores will be maintained at all times. The contractor will cone and block off small areas of parking spaces daily for equipment and materials.

"We hope to complete the majority of the repairs this fall before the contractor has to shut down due to weather conditions," the release stated. "If we need to come back in the spring, we will make sure that all removals poured back before we shut down for the winter."

South Haven to perform annual service line checks

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — During the month of November, water customers in the South Haven area and Covert Township will receive letters from the South Haven Area Water Sewer Authority indicating the current status of their water service line material.

According to a news release, the statuses include unknown, known lead, or galvanized previously connected to lead.

This annual mailing is required for all Michigan drinking water systems and is intended to keep customers informed about potential lead risks from service line materials. The water Sewer authority must verify and record the material of every service line in the system.

"Although lead service lines were banned nationally in 1986, some customers with post-1986 installations may still receive a letter because some portion of the service line is not yet fully documented," the release stated.

Customers will continue to receive annual letters until their service line is completely verified at all four locations including:

■ Inside the building (by appointment).

■ Outside – customer (private) side.

■ Outside – utility (public) side.

■ At the water main in the street.

Customers can check their address by going to www.shawsa.org and going to "Water Service Interactive Map" at the top of the page or scroll down to find "Interactive Map" under the Water Service Replacement heading.

Customers can enter their address to see what is currently known about their service line.

Through The water Sewer authority, the City of South Haven Water Department and Five Star Energy Services are actively verifying service line materials and replacing any lead or galvanized segments.

"Hundreds of customers have already had service lines replaced, and many others have been inspected and confirmed non-lead," the release stated. "Customer participation is essential to finish this effort."

The mailings are sent to billing addresses and property owner addresses (which are often different in the database).

"Please, note that some people may receive two letters because the state requires mailing to both the owner and occupant," the release stated.

Funding to support this effort has been provided by the State of Michigan low-interest revolving fund loan program and a $5.8 million grant through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

For more information go to www.SHAWSA.org.

Photo provided

International touring artists joHn Kennedy, Chris O'Brien and Joel Cooper will present an afternoon of Irish and original songs and stories as part of First Congregational UCC's Fall Concert series.

Musical trio presents Irish music, stories in SH

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — International touring artists joHn Kennedy, Chris O'Brien and Joel Cooper will present an afternoon of Irish and original songs and stories on Nov. 16.

According to a news release, the concert will begin at 3 p.m. at First Congregational UCC as part of the Fall Concert series.

"They have a modern sound, deeply rooted in traditional Irish music... jigs, reels, hornpipes, aires, stories and songs; but it's all about having a good laugh and, if needed, a good cry," the release stated.

joHn, Chris and Joel are founding members of Kennedy's Kitchen, an award-winning Irish band from South Bend, Ind.

"The human voice, fiddle, the almighty tenor banjo, the guitar and the bass are our instruments…every now and again, the kazoo," the release stated. "Band leader joHn Kennedy is not just a musician; he's a storyteller who connects with the audience, making every performance an intimate gathering."

O'Brien, who plays fiddle, banjo, mandolin and sings vocals, has her roots in classical, Appalachian and Irish Traditional music.

Cooper, who plays bass and sings vocals, began his musical career with choral music at Norte Dame then broadened his repertoire to include Irish, folk, classic rock, gospel and blues.

Tickets are $20 at the door and free for children 12 and under.

For information, call Diane and Lisa at 269-637-3804 (opt. 5).

Photo provided

The South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony for MyTown Ace Hardware.

SH welcomes relaunched MyTown Ace Hardware

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Formerly known as Wolverine Ace Hardware, the newly relaunched MyTown Ace Hardware, is now under the ownership of Matthew Jamrog, President and Owner of MyTown Stores, Inc.

According to a news release, the South Haven Area Chamber of Commerce recently hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony for MyTown Ace Hardware, located in downtown South Haven.

"Since acquiring the store on May 28, 2025, Jamrog and his team have implemented a variety of updates and improvements designed to enhance the shopping experience for the South Haven community," the release stated. "Jamrog brings more than 40 years of retail experience and a record of operational excellence."

The remodeled store features polished floors, new lighting and a refreshed interior layout to make shopping easier.

Product offerings have been expanded across multiple departments including:

■ The power equipment and tools section now includes full-line STIHL products, lawn mowers, snow blowers and an expanded selection from Milwaukee, EGO, DeWalt and Craftsman.

■ The grilling section has been updated and expanded with Weber, Big Green Egg, Traeger, and new RecTeq smokers.

■ The hardware and fasteners area has grown by approximately 40 percent, including a wider selection of metric and chrome options.

■ The paint department now offers a full line of Benjamin Moore products, including new oil-based exterior products and Scuff-X trim paints.

■ The key cutting program has been upgraded with new blanks and a computerized cutter.

"Jamrog, who founded MyTown Stores, Inc. with his wife Stephanie in 2016, currently operate a Pinnacle-level Ace Hardware store in Dorr, Mich., achieving Ace Hardware's highest service level for nine consecutive years," the release stated.

Prior to that, he held executive roles at Rylee's Ace Hardware and Meijer, gaining expertise in store operations, human resources and retail management.

"My goal is to build upon the history of outstanding customer service and continuously improve while expanding the products and services we provide," Jamrog said in the release. "We strive for excellence in all we do, serving our community by putting customers' needs first and helping wherever we can through innovative problem solving."

The store has also expanded its hours and is now open Monday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"MyTown Ace Hardware continues to serve local homeowners, DIYers, and contractors with a full range of hardware, paint, tools, outdoor living and seasonal products, all backed by knowledgeable staff ready to help with any project," the release stated.

For more information go to www.acehardware.com or stop by the store at 530 Huron Street.

South Haven Tribune

CLASSIFIEDS

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0900 LEGALS

STATE OF MICHIGAN
PROBATE COURT
VAN BUREN COUNTY

NOTICE TO CREDITORS
Decedent's Estate

Case No.
2025-1151-DE

Estate of: Vivian Sue Leverenz, deceased.
Date of birth: 06/19/1914

NOTICE TO CREDITORS: The decedent, Vivian Sue Leverenz, died 04/10/1986. Creditors of the decedent are notified that all claims against the estate will be forever barred unless presented to Patricia A. Leverenz, personal representative, or to both the probate court at 212 Paw Paw Street, Suite 220, Paw Paw, MI 49079 and the personal representative within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

Date: November 5, 2025

George S. Dunn. P23916
Attorney Name
225 Broadway St, PMB 164
South Haven, MI 49090
269-637-8405

Patricia A. Leverenz
Personal Representative
70583 M-43
South Haven, MI 49090
269-637-4338

Van Buren State Park Bidding for Watercraft Rental
Concession Operator

Make the outdoors your office! The Department of Natural Resources is seeking a qualified vendor to provide **Watercraft Rental** concession services at the Van Buren State Park. The qualified vendor will be required to provide all equipment, personnel, & products. **Obtain a bid packet at** www.www.michigan.gov/StateParkConcessions. Contact (269)355-2614 for additional information. Bids are due January 20, 2026, at 3:00 p.m.

CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS

On Monday, November 24, 2025, the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) for the City of South Haven will hear public comments related to the request(s) below. The public hearing(s) will be held at 7:00 PM at City Hall, 539 Phoenix St, South Haven, concerning the following:

1. 964 Everett Parkway – Nonuse/Dimensional Variance

Jessica McGrath has applied for a dimensional variance seeking relief from Zoning Ordinance Section 2112 to permit a hot tub within 10 ft of the side and rear property lines. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-241-015-01.

Supporting documentation is available for review at the Building Services office, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090. Written comments may be submitted in lieu of or in addition to a personal appearance. Written comments must be received no later than 12 p.m. (noon) on Monday, November 24, 2025. Written comments should be addressed to the ZBA and must be submitted to the Zoning Administrator at kdissette@southhavenmi.gov or via postal mail addressed to the ZBA and sent to 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.

Individuals requesting reasonable accommodation for impairments or disabilities should contact the City Clerk no later than five days prior to the public hearing in person at City Hall, at 269-637-0750, or at mkiker@southhavenmi.gov.

Kelly Getman-Dissette, Zoning Administrator
(269) 637-0760 kdissette@southhavenmi.gov

PUBLIC/LEGAL NOTICES

To place a public notice, please send your requests to **legals@pmginmi.com.**

Please allow 48 hours to process, larger legals may need at least four business days.

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE SEVENTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT IN AND FOR BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA

IN RE: THE MATTER OF: TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS FOR **THE PROPOSED ADOPTION OF:** SUNAMIR RIDER-EL **DOB:** 09/06/2021 Minor Child. **CASE NO.:** FMCE-25-018325

NOTICE OF ACTION FOR TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS AND STEPPARENT ADOPTION

TO: MERCEDES GANT

YOU ARE NOTIFIED that a Petition for Termination of Parental Rights has been filed against you regarding the above-referenced male child, Sunamir Rider-El. DOB 9/6/21. You are required to serve a copy of your written defenses, if any, to Juliana Gaita, Esq. of Juliana Gaita, P.A. whose address is 2500 N. Military Trail Ste. 303, Boca Raton, FL 33431 on or before the below hearing date and file the original with the Clerk of this Court at, Broward County Courthouse, 201 SE 6th Street, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301, before service on Petitioner or immediately thereafter. **If you fail to do so, a default may be entered against you for the relief demanded in the petition.**

You are required to appear before The Honorable Judge Yael Gamm on **December 8, 2025**, at 10:30 am or as soon after as the matter may be called at the Broward County Courthouse, via Zoom: https://17thflcourts.zoom.us/j/697041821 Meeting ID: 697 041 821 for a Final Termination of Parental Rights hearing.

FAILURE TO APPEAR AT THIS HEARING CONSTITUTES CONSENT TO THE TERMINATION OF THE PARENTAL RIGHTS OF YOUR RIGHTS TO THE CHILD. IF YOU FAIL TO APPEAR ON THE DATE AND TIME SPECIFIED YOU MAY LOSE ALL LEGAL RIGHTS TO THE CHILD WHOSE INITIALS APPEAR ABOVE

Mercedes Gant physical description is a black female, dob 12/23/99. Brown eyes, brown hair approximately 5'6 and approximately 150 pounds.

If you fail to file a written response and/or appear at the hearing, a default may be entered against you for the relief demanded in the petition.

This notice shall be published once a week for four consecutive weeks in Broward County, Florida and Van Buren County, Michigan

WITNESS my hand and the seal of said court on October 28, 2025, Broward County, Florida.

Clerk Name: Brenda D. Foreman
As clerk, Circuit Court, Broward County, FL

Juliana Gaita, Esq.
Attorney for Petitioner
2500 N. Military Trail, Ste. 303 Boca Raton, FL 33431
phone (561)869-3703

Village Market Xpress
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OPEN HOUSE
Saturday, November 8th | 11:00AM - 1:00PM
Sunday, November 9th | 1:00PM - 3:00PM

936 Superior Street
South Haven, MI 49090

2 BD., 1.5 BA. This home offers thoughtful design with MANY BARRIER-FREE features including a gently ramped entrance through the back deck. The brand-new kitchen shines as well as functions with quartz countertops, stainless steel appliances, and a layout ideal for those with mobility needs. The stylish tile bathroom includes a roll-in shower and handheld shower head for added comfort. Enjoy the cheerful living and dining spaces that flow seamlessly from the kitchen, complete with a cozy fireplace in the living room. Additional highlights include main-floor laundry with new front-load washer and dryer, a full basement, corner lot setting, and a 2-car detached garage. New Anderson windows, exterior doors, siding, kitchen, bathrooms ......Ask your agent for the complete list of improvements that make this home both charming and functional!

Listed For: $459,000 MLS#25049607

Hosted By:
Cindi Compton, REALTOR®
Cell: 269-214-2459
cindicomptonrealtor@gmail.com
513 Broadway Street, South Haven, MI 49090

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SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Photo provided

South Haven Area Emergency Services recently had their final stop of their Fire Safety Tour at St. Paul Lutheran School sharing the importance of fire safety and prevention.

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "Altered Consumerism" exhibition from Aug. 8 through Sept. 20.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1-4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays.

South Haven Farm Market: Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. through October at Huron Street Pavilion.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Lake Arvesta: Summer at the pasture concert every Friday and Saturday at 6 p.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: New Exhibit – "The Adventures of Liberty Hyde Bailey – Chicago: 1872." Available during museum hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge – Chicago Scoring: 1 pm Tuesdays. Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Bridge – Duplicate Scoring: 1 pm Wednesdays. Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

South Haven Center for the Arts: "The Ghost that Linger" art exhibition available through Nov. 8.

South Haven Memorial Library: Autumn Painting Contest from Oct. 20 to Nov. 10. Participants can pick up a mini canvas from the library and paint, sketch or color something for fall or Thanksgiving related, featuring either books or the library. Painting need to be dropped of by Nov. 10. The pubic can vote on the painting from Nov. 17 to 24.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

November

10 – South Haven Garden Club: Club giving auction at First Congregational Church.

12 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

12 – Michigan Maritime Museum: "Freedom via Water! Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad on and near Lake Michigan" lecture presented by Dr. Larry McClellan at 6:30 p.m.

15 – South Haven Memorial Library: Free STEM activities event from 11 a.m. to noon.

16 – First Congregational UCC: Fall Concert Series featuring the joHn Kennedy Show with Chris O'Brien and Joel Cooper at 3 p.m. General admission is $20 at the door.

17 – Overton Public Engagement meeting: Topic focus is on final design and next steps. From noon to 1:30 p.m. and 5:30 to 7 p.m. at Resurrection Life Ministries Church, 322 Elkenburg Street, South Haven.

18 – Rotary Club: Evening meeting at the American Legion beginning at 5 p.m. Todd Marcy, Senior Director of Digital Operations for the Detroit Lions will present and Larry Wittkop is the program chair.

20 – First Baptist Church: Blood drive from noon to 5:30 p.m.

21 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

22 – Storytellers Senior Readers Theater: The Christmas Gathering at 7 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County. Tickets are $10.

22 – First Congregational Church: Annual Holiday Bazaar from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Featuring the Al-Van Humane Society cookie caper and garden crafts and fresh greens from the South Haven Garden Club.

23 – Storytellers Senior Readers Theater: The Christmas Gathering at 3 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County. Tickets are $10.

25 – Rotary Club: Mike Sawyer, will present on the Senior Ramp Program of Van Buren County and Brian Kurtz is the program chair.

26 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

28 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Writers read-around, new writers welcome from 1 to 4 p.m.

28 – Holiday in the Park: From 4 to 7 p.m. at Dyckman Park.

December

1 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

3 – South Haven Memorial Library: Music and Movement at 11 a.m.

5 – South Haven Memorial Library: Play-doh play date at 11 a.m.

7 – Paw Paw Community Chorus: 25th Annual Christmas Concert at 4 p.m. at Paw Paw United Methodist Church.

8 – South Haven Garden Club: Club Christmas party at First Congregational Church.

10 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

15 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

19 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

20 – South Haven Memorial Library: Free STEM activities event from 11 a.m. to noon.

21 – South Haven Performance Series: Choral ensemble Vox GR to perform at 4 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church.

22 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

29 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

31 – New Years Eve Celebration: Downtown South Haven.

The South Haven Tribune makes every effort to ensure accuracy in its stories.If you believe there is an error, please contact the editor of the page on which it occurred. If you are unsure who to contact, call 269-637-1104 to be directed to the appropriate editor.

Al-Van Humane Society
Adopt • Volunteer • Donate • Advocate
73303 8th Ave. PO Box 421 South Haven, MI 49090
phone 269.637.5062 fax 269.639.2242
Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

Meet our Pets of the Week, Uranium & Radioactive!

This adorable pair of brothers have truly lived up to their glowing names! These two came to Al-Van with their mom when they were just a couple weeks old and have spent the past few months getting healthy and strong after a tough start. Now, thanks to lots of love and care, they're thriving and ready for forever homes of their own!

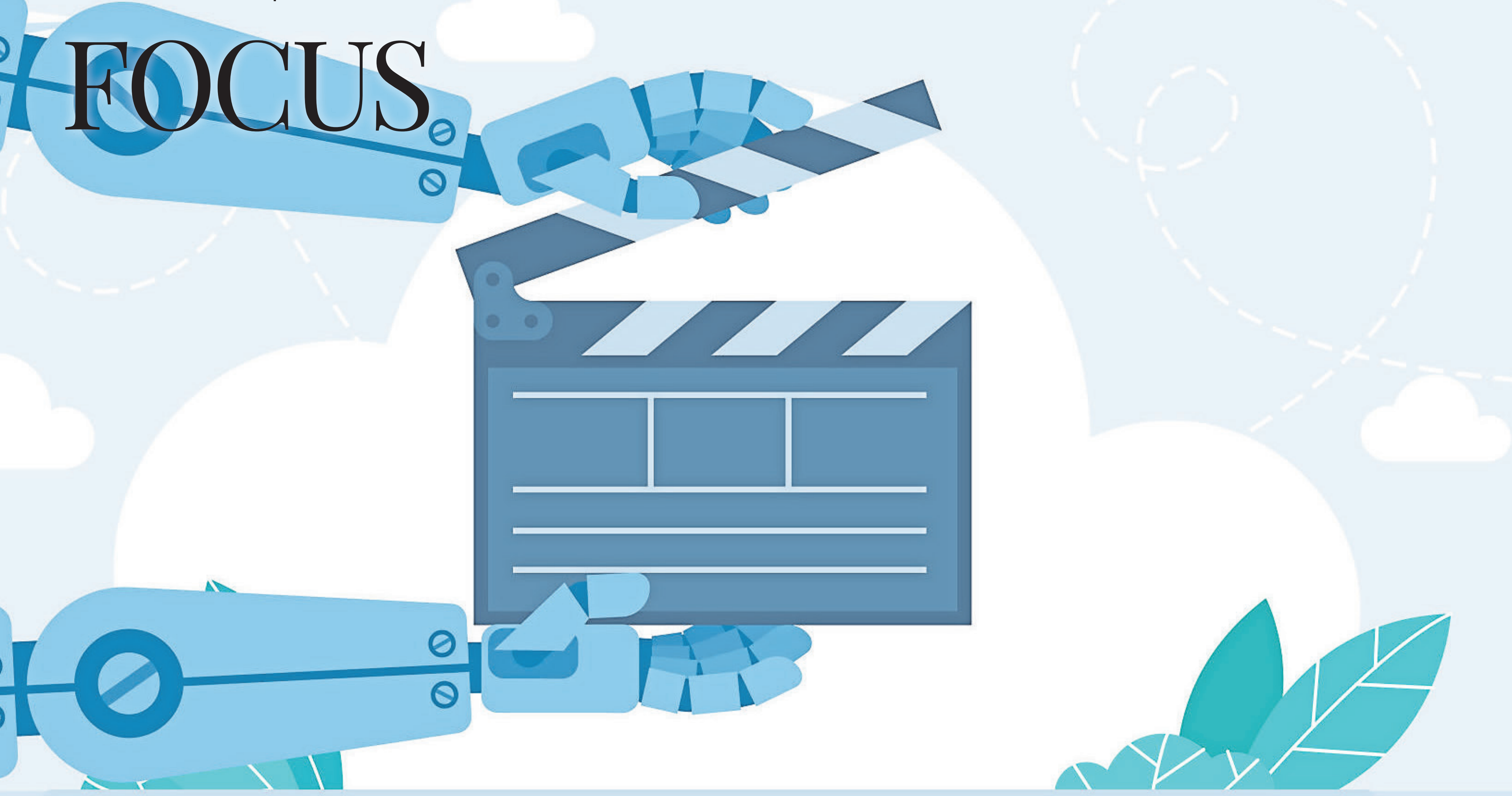
Both boys are incredibly sweet and have the most expressive eyes that will melt your heart. They love to play, snuggle, and soak up all the attention they can get. Radioactive and Uranium would do great together or separately as long as they have a loving home to keep their spirits shining bright. To submit an adoption survey visit us at al-van.org/adopt

Cookie Caper

Save the date for our annual Cookie Caper, November 22nd! Just $5 buys you a plate full of delicious homemade cookies - proceeds benefit Al-Van Humane Society. Want to help bake? Cookie donations will need to be dropped off November 21st at our Adoption Center.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST

Purina dry food for our cats, dogs, and kittens



Yurii Karvatskyi / Getty Images

Sora app's hyperreal AI videos ignite online trust crisis as downloads surge

By NILESH CHRISTOPHER
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Scrolling through the Sora app can feel a bit like entering a real-life multiverse.

Michael Jackson performs standup; the alien from the "Predator" movies flips burgers at McDonald's; a home security camera captures a moose crashing through the glass door; Queen Elizabeth dives from the top of a table at a pub.

Such improbable realities, fantastical futures, and absurdist videos are the mainstay of the Sora app, a new short video app released by ChatGPT maker OpenAI.

The continuous stream of hyperreal, short-form videos made by artificial intelligence is mind-bending and mesmerizing at first. But it quickly triggers a new need to second-guess every piece of content as real or fake.

"The biggest risk with Sora is that it makes plausible deniability impossible to overcome, and that it erodes confidence in our ability to discern authentic from synthetic," said Sam Gregory, an expert on deepfakes and executive director at WITNESS, a human rights organization. "Individual fakes matter, but the real damage is a fog of doubt settling over everything we see."

All videos on the Sora app are entirely AI-generated, and there is no option to share real footage. But from the first week of its launch, users were sharing their Sora videos across all types of social media.

Less than a week after its launch Sept. 30, the Sora app crossed a million downloads, outpacing the initial growth of ChatGPT. Sora also reached the top of the App Store in the U.S. For now, the Sora app is available only to iOS users in the United States, and people cannot access it unless they have an invitation code.

To use the app, people have to scan their faces and read out three numbers displayed on screen for the system to capture a voice signature. Once that's done, users can type a custom text prompt and create hyperreal 10-second videos complete with background sound and dialogue.

Through a feature called "Cameos," users can superimpose their face or a friend's face into any existing video. Though all outputs carry a visible watermark, numerous websites now offer watermark removal for Sora videos.

At launch, OpenAI took a lax approach to enforcing copyright restrictions and allowed the re-creation of copyrighted material by default, unless the owners opted out.

Users began generating AI video featuring characters from such titles as "SpongeBob SquarePants," "South Park," and "Breaking Bad," and videos styled after the game show "The Price Is Right," and the '90s sitcom "Friends."

Then came the re-creation of dead celebrities, including Tupac Shakur roaming the streets in Cuba, Hitler facing off with Michael Jackson, and remixes of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his iconic "I Have A Dream" speech – but calling for freeing the disgraced rapper Diddy.

"Please, just stop sending me AI videos of Dad," Zelda Williams, daughter of late comedian Robin Williams, posted on Instagram. "You're not making art, you're making disgusting, over-processed hot dogs out of the lives of human beings, out of the history of art and music, and then shoving them down someone else's throat, hoping they'll give you a little thumbs up and like it. Gross."

Other dead celebrity re-creations, including Kobe Bryant, Stephen Hawking and President Kennedy, created on Sora have been cross-posted on social media websites, garnering millions of views.

A spokesperson on behalf of Fred Rogers Productions said that Rogers' family was "frustrated by the AI videos misrepresenting Mister Rogers being circulated online."

Videos of Mr. Rogers holding a gun, greeting rapper Tupac, and other satirical fake situations have been shared widely on Sora.

"The videos are in direct contradiction to the careful intentionality and adherence to core child development principles that Fred Rogers brought to every episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. We have contacted OpenAI to request that the voice and likeness of Mister Rogers be blocked for use on the Sora platform, and we would expect them and other AI platforms to respect personal identities in the future," the spokesperson said in a statement to The Times.

Hollywood talent agencies and unions, including SAG-AFTRA, have started to accuse OpenAI of improper use of likenesses. The central tension boils down to control over the use of the likenesses of actors and licensed characters – and fair compensation for use in AI videos.

In the aftermath of Hollywood's concerns over copyright, Sam Altman shared a blog post, promising greater control for rights-holders to specify how their characters can be used in AI videos – and is exploring ways to share revenue with rights-holders.

He also said that studios could now "opt-in" for their characters to be used in AI re-creations, a reversal from OpenAI's original stance of an opt-out regime.

The future, according to Altman, is heading toward creating personalized content for an audience of a few – or an audience of one.

"Creativity could be about to go through a Cambrian explosion, and along with it, the quality of art and entertainment can drastically increase," Altman wrote, calling this genre of engagement "interactive fan fiction."

The estates of dead actors, however, are racing to protect their likeness in the age of AI.

CMG Worldwide, which represents the estates of deceased celebrities, struck a partnership with deepfake detection company Loti AI to protect CMG's rosters of actors and estates from unauthorized digital use.

Loti AI will constantly monitor for AI impersonations of 20 personalities represented by CMG, including Burt Reynolds, Christopher Reeve, Mark Twain and Rosa Parks.

"Since the launch of Sora 2, for example, our signups have increased roughly 30x as people search for ways to regain control over their digital likeness," said Luke Arrigoni, co-founder and CEO of Loti AI.

Since January, Loti AI said it has removed thousands of instances of unauthorized content as new AI tools made it easier than ever to create and spread deepfakes.

After numerous "disrespectful depictions" of Martin Luther King Jr., OpenAI said it was pausing the generation of videos in the civil rights icon's image on Sora, at the request of King's estate. While there are strong free-speech interests in depicting historical figures, public figures and their families should ultimately have control over how their likeness is used, OpenAI said in a post.

Now, authorized representatives or estate owners can request that their likenesses not be used in Sora cameos.

As legal pressure mounts, Sora has become more strict about when it will allow the re-creation of copyrighted characters. It increasingly puts up content policy violations notices.

Now, creating Disney characters or other images triggers a content policy violation warning. Users who aren't fans of the restrictions have started creating video memes about the content policy violation warnings.

There's a growing virality to what has been dubbed "AI slop."

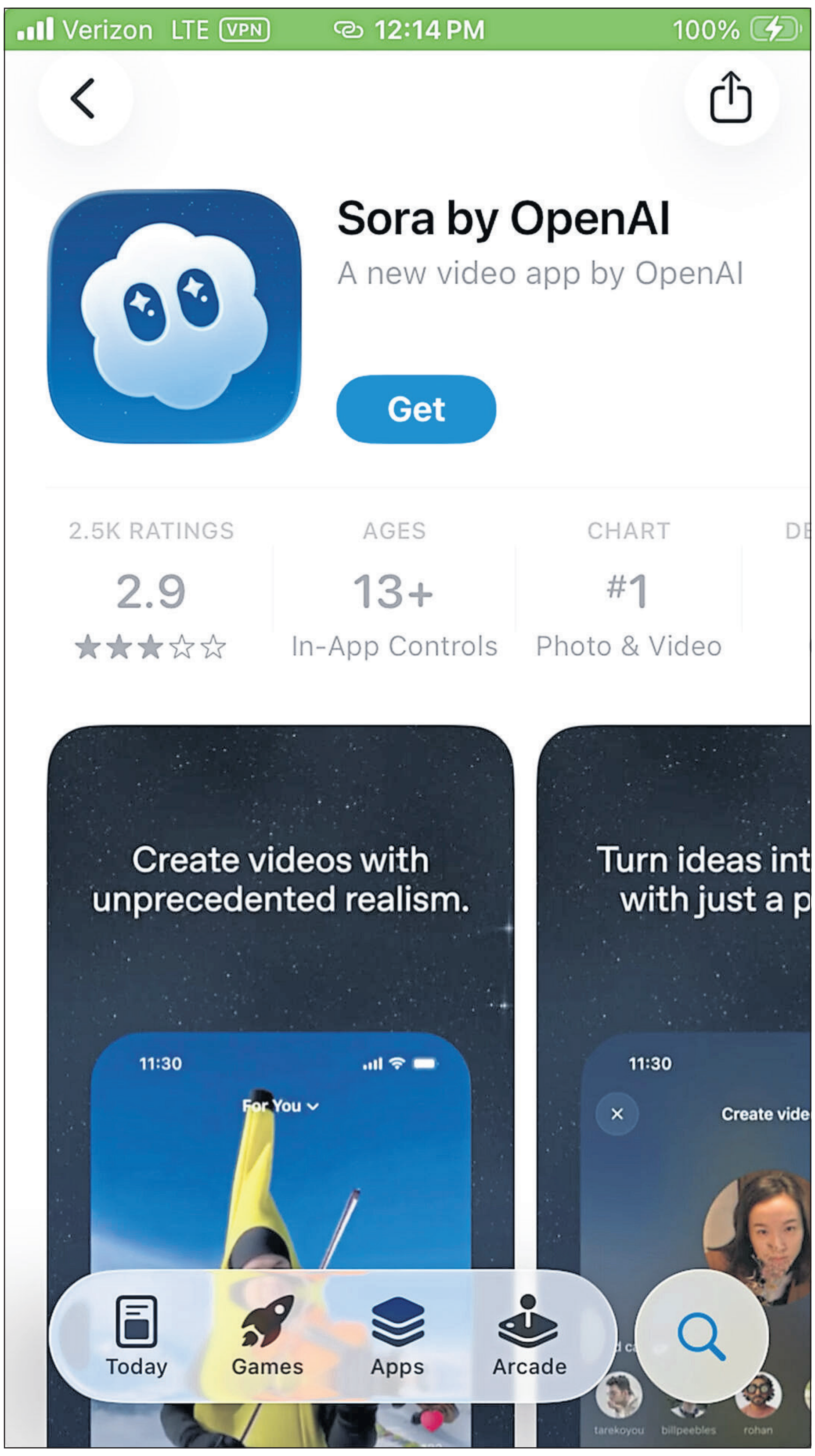
Last week featured ring camera footage of a grandmother chasing a crocodile at the door, and a series of "fat olympics" videos where obese people participate in athletic events such as pole vault, swimming and track events.

Dedicated slop factories have turned the engagement into a money spinner, generating a constant stream of videos that are hard to look away from. One pithy tech commentator dubbed it "Cocomelon for adults."

Even with increasing protections for celebrity likenesses, critics warn that the casual "likeness appropriation" of any common person or situation could lead to public confusion, enhance misinformation and erode public trust.

Meanwhile, even as the technology is being used by bad actors and even some governments for propaganda and promotion of certain political views, people in power can hide behind the flood of fake news by claiming that even real proof was generated by AI, said Gregory of WITNESS.

"I'm concerned about the ability to fabricate protest footage, stage false atrocities, or insert real people with words placed in their mouths into compromising scenarios," he said.



Billy Tompkins / ZUMA Press Wire / TNS

OpenAI's new video-generating app, Sora, hit 1 million downloads in a week, but backlash erupted over unauthorized deepfakes of celebrities, dead figures and copyrighted characters.

FOCUS

Patrick T. Fallon / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

The Colorado State Capitol Building is seen during the Mile High 420 Festival in Denver, Colorado on April 20, 2022, known by some as 'Weed Day."

'Colorado sober' movement ditches alcohol for cannabis, psychedelics

Is it for real?

By JOHN WENZEL
The Denver Post (TNS)

DENVER — Everything in moderation. Including moderation.

That's the idea behind the Colorado sober movement, an unofficial yet growing trend away from alcohol, and toward plant-based and psychedelic drugs.

But how can one be considered sober while, for example, smoking pot and taking LSD?

Because "Colorado sober" – a spin-off of the similar term "California sober" – isn't about abstaining from all substances, but rather the ones that are known to have lasting effects on your body and brain, advocates say. That includes drugs such as cocaine and opioids, but also alcohol, which has waned in recent years as the standard social lubricant for young people.

"Weed and mushrooms have a lot less next-day negative effects than alcohol," said Marissa Poppens, a Denver resident who considers herself Colorado sober. "I'm new to the term but I think people are starting to realize what it means on their own. It's a version of 'natural high.' "

Poppens regularly uses cannabis and microdoses psilocybin – the active psychedelic ingredient in magic mushrooms – not only for recreation, but also to help treat chronic pain and symptoms of multiple sclerosis (MS).

As executive director of the 9-year-old nonprofit MSterios Miracles, Poppens wants to help advocate for and provide resources to people living with MS. She said a flare-up two years ago led to one of her medical professionals suggesting psilocybin. The drug has proven itself as an effective alternative to psychiatric medication, according to licensed psychedelic therapists and researchers, with studies bearing out its transformative effects on depression, PTSD and addiction.

As of 2025, the state's Natural Medicine Division has begun licensing psilocybin healing centers, which follows Colorado's recreational legalization of cannabis for people 21 and over in 2014. The combination of those actions – magic mushrooms have been decriminalized since 2022 so it's not a crime to grow or ingest them, though retail sales are not yet here (as they are for cannabis) – and cultural acceptance has helped Poppens feel better about abandoning alcohol, she said, and find allies in her quest for nontraditional relief.

"I was able to get off my prescribed depression medication, which I hated taking, after I started microdosing," she said, adding that her regimen is based around wellness, not recreational highs.

In that way, it's not just a cheeky term for non-drinkers, said Josh Kesselman, owner of the cannabis magazine High Times. It's an evolving descriptor for people who want to explore, not pummel, their minds.

Research compiled by the Cleveland Clinic has shown that the movement away from alcohol is rooted as much in alcohol's deleterious effects as increased emphasis on education, mental wellness and healthier lifestyles.

"Alcohol is a depressant and never the answer to a bad day," said addiction psychiatrist Dr. Akhil Anand in the Cleveland Clinic report. "Gen Z seems to understand that concept, and they've moved in a different direction."

"It's a great place for many of us to dwell," Kesselman said. "Cannabis expands the brain, the neural network fires, and synapses connect. We have an endocannabinoid system for a reason."

Gen Z's alcohol consumption is dropping rapidly, with a Journal of American Medicine report showing that the percentage of college students abstaining from alcohol was 28 percent in 2022, as compared with 20 percent in 2018. Sales of beer have dropped year-over-year, and Pew Research and other reports have shown that the youth movement away from alcohol has rippled out to all age groups.

"I broke up with wine!" reads a testimonial for Feals cannabis gummies, which is categorized under Health/Beauty on Facebook. The image on its social media campaign shows a spilled glass of red wine next to an orange packet of THC and CBD gummies.

"Ten years ago, I would go visit friends in New York, and I could never handle two nights in a row of drinking, because by the third night I'd be useless," Kesselman said. "Alcohol is) something that takes your life force and gives you nothing in return. Plus, when people drink they do terrible things. Nobody's like, 'Let's get stoned and rob people.' "

Kesselman, who also founded the Raw Rolling Papers company, has a strong business reason for encouraging others to drop alcohol for cannabis. But it's no smokescreen, he said: There's not an objectively right or wrong way to be sober, and that can easily include abstaining from substances altogether.

That would not, however, be considered Colorado sober, or even sober-curious. Rather, Colorado sober describes intentional consumption based around wellness, said Ricardo Baca, who was appointed to the state's first Natural Medicine Advisory Board last year by Gov. Jared Polis.

"The California sober movement was really born out of recreational cannabis, but also the medical movement before it," Baca said of that state's pioneering cannabis laws. "So I was glad when I first heard of the Colorado sober movement, because there was space being carved out for our home state to stake this claim around intentional consumption.

"It's not about restriction or prohibition or a purity test, because we've seen how that goes," he added, "but about redefining sobriety and aligning with plants and mushrooms and chemical-based alternatives."

That covers purely synthetic substances that have shown positive, peer-reviewed results as medical treatments – but that can also have their own party-ready uses as recreational drugs. Think ketamine, MDMA (a.k.a. ecstasy or molly), kratom and DMT.

Baca has long studied the subject, both as the former editor of The Denver Post's groundbreaking Cannabist journalism site, as well as founder and owner of Denver's Grasslands PR and marketing agency. His clients include cannabis, psilocybin, kratom and other companies – including High Times' Kesselman. He's delivered TEDx Talks and keynotes at South by Southwest and other conferences detailing how cannabis works in pain management and the ripple effects of its legalization.

He acknowledged his company benefits by boosting the Colorado sober trend, but said that it's more about harm reduction than profit.

"We've seen the California sober movement co-opted by brands and businesses, and we will absolutely see the Colorado sober movement co-opted by similar brands," Baca said. "I don't see anything wrong with it, that myself and other marketers and businesses will take advantage of this to help tell their own stories. It's still an organic trend that came from the community."

On the other hand, the idea of being Colorado sober soft-pedals the potentially addictive effects of cannabis and psychedelics, said Alton P. Dillard II, a media consultant for the One Chance to Grow Up nonprofit. The Colorado organization includes a number of top medical and academic advisors advocating against drug use for young people.

"We recognize the intense toll of alcohol addiction and understand that adults make choices that they think best support their health," he said. "The problem for youth is that they are already getting confusing messages that marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms are healthy, natural medicines.

"In fact, they both present significant risks to young brains, which are growing until age 25," he continued. "When weed and mushrooms are presented as part of a 'sober' lifestyle, teens may get the impression that they're harmless. They're not."

High Times' Kesselman said the Colorado sober movement is not about pushing anyone toward drugs.

"Just like with anything else, people have to consume within their own limits, and we at High Times do not recommend any kind of overconsumption," he said. "But what that means to one person might be different than someone else, and you have to find that balance in your own life. This is a way to change your thinking, not just your chemistry."

adventtr / Getty Images

Can you really be addicted to food?

Researchers are uncovering convincing similarities to drug addiction

By CLAIRE WILCOX
Addiction Psychiatrist and Adjunct Faculty, University of New Mexico
(The Conversation)

People often joke that their favorite snack is "like crack" or call themselves "chocoholics" in jest.

But can someone really be addicted to food in the same way they could be hooked on substances such as alcohol or nicotine?

As an addiction psychiatrist and researcher with experience in treating eating disorders and obesity, I have been following the research in this field for the past few decades. I have written a textbook on food addiction, obesity and overeating disorders, and, more recently, a self-help book for people who have intense cravings and obsessions for some foods.

While there is still some debate among psychologists and scientists, a consensus is emerging that food addiction is a real phenomenon. Hundreds of studies have confirmed that certain foods – often those that are high in sugar and ultraprocessed – affect the brains and behaviorof certain peoplesimilarly to other addictive substances such as nicotine.

Still, many questions remain about which foods are addictive, which people are most susceptible to this addiction and why. There are also questions as to how this condition compares to other substance addictions and whether the same treatments could work for patients struggling with any kind of addiction.

How does addiction work?

The neurobiological mechanisms of addiction have been mapped out through decades of laboratory-based research using neuroimaging and cognitive neuroscience approaches.

Studies show that preexisting genetic and environmental factors set the stage for developing an addiction. Regularly consuming an addictive substance then causes a rewiring of several important brain systems, leading the person to crave more and more of it.

This rewiring takes place in three key brain networks that correspond to key functional domains, often referred to as the reward system, the stress response system and the system in charge of executive control.

First, using an addictive substance causes the release of a chemical messenger called dopamine in the reward network, which makes the user feel good. Dopamine release also facilitates a neurobiological process called conditioning, which is basically a neural learning process that gives rise to habit formation.

As a result of the conditioning process, sensory cues associated with the substance start to have increasing influence over decision-making and behavior, often leading to a craving. For instance, because of conditioning, the sight of a needle can drive a person to set aside their commitment to quit using an injectable drug and return to it.

Second, continued use of an addictive substance over time affects the brain's emotional or stress response network. The user's body and mind build up a tolerance, meaning they need increasing amounts of the substance to feel its effect. The neurochemicals involved in this process are different than those mediating habit formation and include a chemical messenger called noradrenaline and internally produced opioids such as endorphins. If they quit using the substance, they experience symptoms of withdrawal, which can range from irritability and nausea to paranoia and seizures.

At that point, negative reinforcement kicks in. This is the process by which a person keeps going back to a substance because they've learned that using the substance doesn't just feel good, but it also relieves negative emotions. During withdrawal from a substance, people feel profound emotional discomfort, including

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sadness and irritability. Negative reinforcement is why someone who is trying to quit smoking, for instance, will be at highest risk of relapse in the week just after stopping and during times of stress, because in the past they'd normally turn to cigarettes for relief.

Third, overuse of most addictive substances progressively damages the brain's executive control network, the prefrontal cortex, and other key parts of the brain involved in impulse control and self-regulation. Over time, the damage to these areas makes it more and more difficult for the user to control their behavior around these substances. This is why it is so hard for long-term users of many addictive substances to quit.

What evidence is there that food is addictive?

Many studies over the past 25 years have shown that high-sugar and other highly pleasurable foods – often foods that are ultraprocessed – act on these brain networks in ways that are similar to other addictive substances. The resulting changes in the brain fuel further craving for and overuse of the substance – in this case, highly rewarding food.

Clinical studies have demonstrated that people with an addictive relationship to food demonstrate the hallmark signs of a substance use disorder.

Studies also indicate that for some people, cravings for highly palatable foods go well beyond just a normal hankering for a snack and are, in fact, signs of addictive behavior. One study found that cues associated with highly pleasurable foods activate the reward centers in the brain, and the degree of activation predicts weight gain.

In other words, the more power the food cue has to capture a person's attention, the more likely they are to succumb to cravings for it.

Multiple studies have also found that suddenly ending a diet that's high in sugar can cause withdrawal, similar to when people quit opioids or nicotine.

Excessive exposure to high-sugar foods has also been found to reduce cognitive function and cause damage to the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, the parts of the brain that mediate executive control and memory.

In another study, when obese people were exposed to food and told to resist their craving for it by ignoring it or thinking about something else, their prefrontal cortexes were more active compared with nonobese individuals. This indicates that it was more difficult for the obese group to fight their cravings.

Finding safe treatments for patients struggling with food

Addiction recovery is often centered on the idea that the fastest way to get well is to abstain from the problem substance. But unlike nicotine or narcotics, food is something that all people need to survive, so quitting cold turkey isn't an option.

In addition, eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorderoften occur alongside addictive eating. Most psychologists and psychiatrists believe these illnesses have their root cause in excessive dietary restriction.

For this reason, many eating disorder treatment professionals balk at the idea of labeling some foods as addictive. They are concerned that encouraging abstinence from particular foods could trigger binge eating and extreme dieting to compensate.

A way forward

But others argue that, with care, integrating food addiction approaches into eating disorders treatment is feasible and could be lifesaving for some.

The emerging consensus around this link is moving researchers and those who treat eating disorders to consider food addiction in their treatment models.

One such approach might look like the one described to me by addiction psychiatrist and eating disorders specialist Dr. Kim Dennis. In line with traditional eating disorder treatment, nutritionists at her residential clinic strongly discourage their patients from restricting calories. At the same time, in line with traditional addiction treatment, they help their patients to consider significantly reducing or completely abstaining from particular foods to which they have developed an addictive relationship.

Additional clinical studies are already being carried out. But going forward, more studies are needed to help clinicians find the most effective treatments for people with an addictive relationship with food.

Efforts are underway by groups of psychologists, psychiatrists, neuroscientists and mental health providers to get "ultraprocessed food use disorder," also known as food addiction, into future editions of diagnostic manuals such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases.

Beyond acknowledging what those treating food addiction are already seeing in the field, this would help researchers get funding for additional studies of treating food addiction. With more information about what treatments will work best for whom, those who have these problems will no longer have to suffer in silence, and providers will be better equipped to help them.

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FOCUS

Aaron Rapoport via The Conversation / CC BY-SA

In a 2024 exhibition game at Manzanar, players – many of them descendants of internment camp detainees – donned custom 1940s-style uniforms.

Baseball returns to a Japanese American detention camp after a historic ball field was restored

By SUSAN H. KAMEI
University of Southern California
(The Conversation)

Ansel Adams via Library of Congress

A 1943 baseball game at Manzanar Relocation Center, Calif.

THE CONVERSATION

In the spring of 1942, 15-year-old Momo Nagano needed a way to fill her time.

She was imprisoned at the Manzanar Relocation Center along with approximately 10,000 other people of Japanese ancestry. When she'd arrived with her mother and two brothers, she'd been horrified.

The detention facility was located in the middle of the desert, about 225 miles northeast of Los Angeles. As I describe in my book "When Can We Go Back to America? Voices of Japanese American Incarceration during World War II," barbed wire surrounded the perimeter and armed soldiers peered down from guard towers. The toilets and showers lacked partitions, and Nagano was forced to stand in long lines for hours in mess halls that served canned food. Her bed was a metal cot. She was directed to stuff straw into a bag for a makeshift mattress. She didn't know whether she and her family would ever be able to return to their Los Angeles home.

One day, the teenager decided to pick up a glove and play softball. Her son, Dan Kwong, told me in an interview that Nagano ended up playing catcher for The Gremlins, one of the camp's many women's softball teams.

"In one game, a batter connected with the ball and then threw the bat, clocking my mom in the nose, breaking it," he said. "But despite her injury, she still enjoyed playing, even though she didn't think her team was very good."

Eighty years later, the descendants of prisoners – such as Nagano's son, Kwong – are playing baseball again in Manzanar. Thanks to an effort spearheaded by Kwong, a baseball field on the site has been restored as a way to both celebrate the resiliency of so many prisoners and memorialize this dark period in U.S. history.

A massive removal effort

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. government wrongly assumed that Japanese-descended West Coast residents would be more loyal to Japan and presented an espionage risk.

So on Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order that gave the U.S. Army the authority to forcibly remove all first-generation immigrants from Japan and their American-born descendants from their West Coast homes.

In March 1942, U.S. soldiers began transporting the detainees to temporary detention sites under Army jurisdiction. The Manzanar site opened on March 21, 1942, and it eventually became one of 10 long-term detention centers, colloquially known as "the camps."

According to Duncan Ry□ken Williams, the director of The Irei Project, which has compiled the most comprehensive list of those detained, nearly 127,000 people of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated between 1942 and 1947, when the last camp closed. Two-thirds of them were American citizens. Most were imprisoned for the duration of the war, and all were held without hearings or charges leveled against them.

A love of the game

Adjusting to their new grim reality, the detainees embraced the Japanese spirit of "gaman," which means to endure hardship with dignity and resilience. They set up an education system and coordinated an array of activities. And they immediately organized baseball and softball games.

Many Japanese American families had already developed a passion for the two sports.

Horace Wilson, an educator from Maine, is credited with introducing baseball to Japan in the early 1870s. In 1872 the Yeddo Royal Japanese Troupe became the first Japanese people to play baseball on U.S. soil. When young Japanese men started immigrating to the U.S. in the late 19th century, they brought with them a love of America's pastime.

Kerry Yo Nakagawa, the director of the Nisei Baseball Research Project, has written about the vanguards of Japanese American baseball. At a time when players of color were excluded from Major League Baseball, talented Japanese American ballplayers such as Kenichi Zenimura formed teams that barnstormed the country. They even played alongside Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in an exhibition game in Fresno, Calif., on Oct. 29, 1927.

"Every pre-war Japanese American community had a baseball team and they brought their love of baseball with them to the assembly centers and their camps," Nakagawa explained to me. Though Zenimura was forced to leave his Fresno home and go to a camp in Gila River, Arizona, he soon had a baseball diamond and a 32-team league up and running.

Patriotism on the diamond

At Manzanar, baseball was easily the most popular sport. According to Dave Goto, the Manzanar National Historic Site arborist, the camp had 10 baseball and softball diamonds on the grounds and more than 120 teams divided into 12 leagues. The camp newspaper, the Manzanar Free Press, provided detailed game recaps, and thousands turned out to watch the games at Manzanar's "A" Field.

"Watching baseball played at a semi-pro level was entertainment and also gave them a sense of normalcy and community," Nakagawa said.

But for those who felt their loyalty to the U.S. was unfairly questioned, baseball was also a powerful way to express their identity as Americans, especially for the U.S.-born children of Japanese immigrants. Takeo Suo, who was incarcerated at Manzanar, recalled, "Putting on a baseball uniform was like wearing the American flag." Or, as Nakagawa put it, "What could be more American than playing the all-American pastime?"

After the war was over and the camps closed, those who'd been imprisoned had to focus on rebuilding their lives. Many were unable to return to their prewar hometowns. For those who ended up back on the West Coast, baseball continued to play an important role.

As Japanese American journalist and sports historian Chris Komai explained in a program at the Japanese American National Museum, "Baseball was a way for them to reestablish their communities while they dealt with antagonism and discrimination. Through the games they stayed connected with their friends and relatives who were now scattered."

Postwar community baseball gave rise to the Southern California Nisei Athletic Union Baseball Leagues and other leagues that still operate. Kwong began playing for the Nisei Athletic Union in 1971 and does so to this day.

Rebuilding a dusty field of dreams

Nagano instilled in her son a commitment not only to baseball but also to social justice. A performance artist, Kwong stages a one-man play, "Return of the Samurai Centerfielder," to shed light on this episode in history through the lens of playing baseball at Manzanar.

Two years ago, he set out to restore the main Manzanar ball field and to bring baseball back to the site as a tribute to his late mother and other Manzanar detainees.

Working with Goto, the site arborist, volunteer construction supervisor Chris Siddons, Manzanar archaeologist Jeff Burton and other Manzanar site staff, Kwong and his team have restored the field almost exactly as it was. They carefully scrutinized archival photos, some taken by famed landscape photographer Ansel Adams and others snapped by studio photographer Toyo Miyatake, who'd been imprisoned at Manzanar. Miyatake's photos were provided by his grandson, Alan Miyatake.

From November 2023 to October 2024, volunteers cleared sagebrush, dug post holes and poured concrete, enduring intense heat, strong winds and relentless dust.

On Oct. 26, 2024, baseball returned to Manzanar after more than 80 years before an invitation-only audience. In the inaugural game, Kwong's Li'l Tokio Giants beat the Lodi JACL Templars. In the game that followed, players donned custom 1940s-style uniforms and used vintage baseball equipment lent by History For Hire prop house. Many of the players were descendants of Japanese Americans who'd been incarcerated at Manzanar and other camps.

That day, Kwong was emotional as he said, "Mom would have gotten such a kick out of this."

Kwong's team has completed an announcer's booth in time for this year's grand opening, a doubleheader open to the public. The games were originally scheduled for Oct. 18, 2025, but have been postponed due to the U.S. government shutdown.

For Kwong, staging a historical reenactment of how detainees played ball behind barbed wire pays tribute to their resilience, connects camp survivors and descendants with their past, and allows them to share their story with the American public. He hopes the games can become an annual event, a recurring celebration.

His motto: "In this place of sadness, injustice, and pain, we will do something joyous, righteous, and healing. We will play baseball."

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HEALTH

Getty Images

Your late teens and early 20s are crucial for lifelong heart health

By JEWEL SCOTT
University of South Carolina
(The Conversation)

Emerging adulthood – the life stage that unfolds around ages 18-25 – is full of major transitions, such as starting college or learning a trade, making new friends and romantic connections, and generally becoming more independent.

It's also a stage where behaviors that diminish heart health, such as spending more time sitting, consuming more fast food and using more tobacco and alcohol, become more common. In fact, only about 1 in 4 youths maintain positive health behavior patterns during the transition to adulthood.

More Americans die of heart disease than of any other condition. People often think of heart disease as an illness that mostly affects older people, but data from electronic health records show that the rate of heart disease in people under 40 has more than doubled since 2010 and tripled among people who use tobacco. Researchers like me are learning a great deal more about how heart health later in life heavily depends on the habits built during late adolescence and early adulthood.

I am a primary care nurse practitioner and researcher studying how early life shapes long-term heart health. In my clinical practice, I frequently care for people in their early 20s who are entering adulthood and are already facing serious cardiovascular risk factors such as elevated blood pressure, high blood sugar or a body mass index in the obesity range.

Just as young people on the cusp of adulthood make important decisions about their education, career and relationships, the health habits they build during this critical time also lay the foundation for lifelong heart health and better quality of life.

Early roots of heart disease

The most common form of heart disease is atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, which develops when sticky, fatty plaque builds up in the blood vessels and makes it harder for blood to flow.

Heart health doesn't suddenly decline in middle age. It starts to slip much earlier, often without people realizing it. In fact, research shows that a key turning point is around age 17. That's when overall heart health scores based on behaviors such as diet, movement and sleep, along with clinical measures such as blood pressure, begin to worsen.

That means by the time many young people are finishing high school, heart disease risk factors are already emerging. The good news is that most of the risk factors that drive this buildup are modifiable – meaning you can do something about them.

In a report I co-authored in March, my colleagues and I explored the key risk factors for heart disease in emerging adults. One of the most important is nicotine exposure. Use of cigarettes, vapes and other nicotine products has surged among young adults in recent years, from 21 percent of 18- to 23-year-olds in 2002 to 43 percent in 2018. Nicotine damages blood vessels and speeds up the plaque formation process, increasing the risk of serious heart problems later in life. While signs such as chest discomfort or shortness of breath tend to show up much later, the groundwork for those symptoms is laid much earlier.

Obesity is another early risk factor. In fact, 1 in 5 young people under age 25 have a BMI of 30 or higher, and projections suggest nearly 3 in 5 will meet that threshold by age 35.

Meanwhile, fewer than half of adults ages 18-34 recognize high cholesterol, obesity, high blood pressure and lack of physical activity as heart disease risk factors. These early warning signs, often uncovered during routine checkups, can set the stage for future heart disease.

Societal factors shape heart health, too

Heart health isn't shaped by individual choices alone. Broader policies and systems also play a major role.

For example, the Affordable Care Act allows young adults to stay on their parents' insurance plans until age 26, which can help ensure access to preventive services. These services, such as routine checkups, blood pressure screenings and conversations about family history, are key opportunities for your primary care provider to catch early signs of cardiovascular risk.

While preventive care use among young adults increased after the ACA was passed, overall rates of preventive care visits still remain low. Policies that expand access to health care and that make it easy for young people to take advantage of these services, such as telehealth, can make a real difference. And if a provider doesn't bring up heart health during a well-check visit, patients can ask questions or start the conversation themselves.

Beyond health care access, the conditions of people's daily lives, such as where they live, their education level and their economic stability, also play important roles in heart health. Neighborhoods can include resources such as parks and green spaces, which make healthy choices more feasible. Education and stable employment are tied to health care access, lower stress and food security, all of which support a healthier heart.

Healthy social connections matter, too. Strong, supportive relationships are linked to better overall well-being, including heart health. Recently, several major health organizations have spotlighted loneliness as a public health issue. However, there is still a lot to learn about exactly how social connections translate to healthier lives, and not enough of this research focuses on young adults.

Pew research shows that 1 in 3 teens report near-constant use of social media, but those connections do not yield the same health benefits as interacting in real life. In my own research, I am investigating how social connection affects heart health in young adults in particular.

Building a foundation for heart health

There is a lot you can do today to make a difference in your heart health. In our recent report, written with the American Heart Association, my colleagues and I highlighted a group of eight risk factors that people can modify to reduce their heart disease risk, called the Essential 8.

Four are health behaviors. In addition to avoiding nicotine, young people should prioritize getting 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity a week, or around 20 minutes a day, as recommended by the American Heart Association. They should also aim to get seven to nine hours of sleep nightly and to eat a diet rich in fish, berries and vegetables. Even small changes in these four behaviors can have positive effects.

Of these four behaviors, U.S. children score worst on diet – an important area for improvement in the transition to adulthood. Young adults with stronger cooking skills tend to have healthier eating habits in middle age, suggesting that learning how to cook could be a valuable step toward better heart health.

The other four factors are clinical measures: blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol and BMI. Since the early 2000s, three of the four – blood pressure, blood sugar and BMI – have all worsened among young adults.

These changes can go unnoticed until much later, but checking in on them early creates an opportunity to take action. The next time you are at a checkup, ask your provider about your heart health – even if you think you're too young to be worrying about heart disease. A simple conversation today could shape the way you feel years from now, and your future heart will thank you.

Jewel Scott is an assistant professor of Nursing Science at the University of South Carolina. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.

ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN

How to talk with kids about tragedies and other traumatic news events

By DAVID SCHONFELD, MD, FAAP
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

After any crisis or disaster, families often struggle with what they should say to children and how to help them cope.

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages parents, teachers, child care providers and others who work closely with children to review information about the event and present it in a way that their child can understand, adjust to and handle in a healthy way.

No matter what age or developmental stage your child is, you can start by asking what they've already heard. Most children will have heard something, no matter how old they are.

After you ask them what they've heard, ask what questions they have and how they feel about what's happened. Older children, teens, and young adults may ask for and benefit from more information than younger children. But no matter what age your child is, it's best to keep the discussion straightforward and direct.

In general, it is best to share basic information with children, not graphic or unnecessary details about tragic circumstances. Children and adults alike want to be able to understand enough so they know what's going on and what implications it has for them. Graphic information and images should be avoided.

Avoid exposure to repetitive graphic images and sounds that may appear on television, radio, social media, the internet and other sources.

With older children, if they will be viewing news coverage, consider recording it ahead of time. That allows you to preview it and evaluate its contents before you sit down with them to watch it. Then, as you watch it with them, you can stop, pause and have a discussion when you need to.

Children will generally follow good advice. But you have to let them make some decisions about what they're ready for. Most children will have access to the news and graphic images through social media and the internet right from their cell phone. You need to be aware of what's out there and take steps in advance to talk to children about what they might hear or see. Invite your children to tell you about things they see or hear that may be confusing or upsetting.

The reality is that even preschool-age children will hear about major crisis events. It's best that they hear about it from a parent or caregiver, rather than from another child, in the media or through overheard conversations.

Even the youngest child needs accurate information, but you don't want to be too vague. Simply saying, "Something happened in a faraway town and some people got hurt," doesn't tell the child enough about what happened. The child may not understand why this is so different from people getting hurt every day and why so much is being said about it.

The underlying message for a parent to convey is, "It's understandable if these things bother you. We are here to support each other."

After asking your child what they have heard and if they have questions or concerns about what happened during a school shooting, community bombing, natural disaster or even a disaster in another country, a parent can say something like:

"Yes. In [city], [state]"(and here you might need to give some context, depending on whether it's nearby or far away, for example, 'That's a city/state that's pretty far from/close to here'), there was a crisis (explain what the crisis was)and many people were hurt (add more information). The police and the government are doing their jobs so they can try to make sure that it doesn't happen again."

You can follow up as needed based on your child's reactions and questions.

Parents who have a child with a developmental delay or disability should gear their responses to their child's developmental level or abilities, rather than their chronologic age. If you have a teenage child whose level of intellectual functioning is more similar to a 7-year-old, for instance, gear your initial explanation to what you might share with most 7-year-olds. Start by giving basic information and provide further explanation in response to your child's questions. Provide further information in the most appropriate and clear way you can.

What's helpful to a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder may be different. For instance, the child may find less comfort in cuddling than some other children. Parents should try something else that has calmed and comforted their child on other occasions. Ask yourself, "Given who my child is, their personality, temperament and developmental abilities and what generally helps calm them when they are worried or upset, what might work for them?"

You may see signs that children are having difficulty adjusting. Some things to look for are:

- **Sleep problems:** Watch for trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, difficulty waking, nightmares or other sleep disturbances.
- **Physical complaints:** Children may complain of feeling tired, having a headache or stomachache, or generally feeling unwell.
- **Changes in behavior:** You may notice your child eating too much or less than usual. Look for signs of regressive behavior, including social regression, acting more immature or becoming less patient and more demanding or irritable. A child who once separated easily from their parents may become clingy. Teens may begin or change current patterns of tobacco, alcohol or substance use.
- **Emotional problems:** Children may experience undue sadness, depression, anxiety or fears.

Sometimes, it can be hard to tell if a child is reacting in a typical way to an unusual event, or whether they are having significant problems coping and might benefit from extra support. If you are concerned, talk to your child's pediatrician, your child's teacher, or a mental health professional or counselor in the school or community.

Don't wait for symptoms. Children often do a good job of hiding their distress. Start the discussion early and keep the dialogue going.

David Schonfeld, MD, FAAP, is an Executive Committee member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Children and Disasters and a member of the Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. He also serves as Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, and Professor of Clinical Pediatrics, Keck School of Medicine of USC.

Dreamstime / TNS

In general, it is best to share basic information with children, not graphic or unnecessary details about tragic circumstances. Children and adults alike want to be able to understand enough so they know what's going on and what implications it has for them.

FINANCE

Economists are realizing the job market is cooling

Workers have known it for months

By SARAH FOSTER
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Joe Raedle / Getty Images / TNS

A 'Now Hiring' paper sits on the table as recruiters for Teleperformance company engage job seekers at the Mega JobNewsUSA South Florida Job Fair held in the Amerant Bank Arena on Sept. 25 in Sunrise, Florida. Hiring managers and recruiters attended the job fair to recruit workers for some of the positions businesses are trying to fill in Miami, Broward, and Palm Beach Counties.

Andy Challenger is the person businesses call when it's time to let workers go. And for the past year and a half, his phone hasn't stopped ringing.

A third-generation outplacement consultant at Challenger, Gray & Christmas – the firm his grandfather founded in the 1960s after his own layoff – Challenger has heard a variety of reasons over the past few months for trimming headcount. Companies looking to cut staff after the pandemic-era hiring boom. Executives debating how to integrate artificial intelligence. Businesses worrying about eating the cost of higher tariffs. Firms tightening their belts in a slowing economy.

As economic data continued to suggest a shockingly resilient labor market, his workload told a different story.

Anyone who has watched a friend lose work, seen a "Now Hiring" sign quietly come down, scrolled through LinkedIn profiles marked "#OpenToWork" or worried about how far your own paycheck will stretch, knows what Challenger is talking about. Economic reports can tell one story; your reality often tells another.

For much of the past few years, Americans have been told the job market was strong. The numbers showed solid hiring and low unemployment. Economists have said it's propped up the entire economy, fueling consumer spending that keeps surprising forecasters.

But for many, that story has never quite matched what was happening at their kitchen tables. More than 2 in 5 workers (43 percent) didn't receive a pay increase at all over the past 12 months, the highest in four years and a sign of a slowing job market, according to Bankrate's new Pay Raise Survey. A rising share of Americans in the labor force (42 percent in 2025 from 36 percent in 2024) also say they aren't confident they'll find a better-paying job or get a pay raise at their current position over the next 12 months.

Economists are realizing that Americans were right all along

The data may finally be starting to reflect Americans' experiences. Hiring over the past four months has flatlined. Recent revisions from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show the economy added nearly a million fewer jobs – 911,000 – than previously reported between March 2024 and March 2025. All of it's adding to signs that Americans may have gotten it right, economists say.

The numbers, though, still might not be telling the full story. The U.S. economy grew by the fastest pace in almost two years last quarter, but that might be because upper-income Americans are propping up spending. The top 10 percent of Americans now account for nearly half of consumer spending, up from 35 percent in the early 1990s, according to Moody's Analytics.

Meanwhile, artificial intelligence is juicing up the economy. Business investment in intellectual property contributed just over one-fifth of recent economic growth in the second quarter of this year, data from the Department of Commerce shows.

The disconnect can give Americans the perception that they're struggling alone. Over 2 in 5 (43 percent) U.S. adults say money negatively affects their mental health, above things like their health and relationships or even politics and world news, according to Bankrate's Money and Mental Health Survey.

Those Americans are also nearly three times more likely to have paid a bill late in the last month, the survey found.

"If everyone is struggling, well, then it's a systemic breakdown. If I'm the one struggling, whether that's true or not, well, there's something wrong with me," says Nate Astle, a certified financial therapist and the founder of the Financial Therapy Clinical Institute. "My cynicism for the media or the stats I'm hearing and my distrust of institutions grows even wider because this isn't even close to my experience."

Those discrepancies also make it harder for policymakers to prescribe the right medicine. Federal Reserve officials cut interest rates at their September meeting to give the labor market more support, but they've been cautious about moving too quickly, fearful that they could worsen inflation. Keeping rates high for too long, though, could weaken the job market even more.

"In this moment in particular, there is a greater need to understand what's going on at different income levels and for different populations," Long says. "For the bottom 80 percent, we can see it in their spending habits. This is not a boom time for them. This is very much a back to the paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle. The real concern is, when does it go from paycheck to paycheck to starting to miss bills?"

The job market might not be getting much better, says this small business owner

Chris Taylor has a foot in both worlds. A trained economist turned small business owner, he co-owns Manhattan's oldest chocolate house, Li-Lac Chocolates, with six locations around New York City. But Taylor doesn't need data to confirm that the job market is slowing. He sees it on the ground.

"We are getting seriously qualified candidates that six months ago wouldn't be bothered to talk to us," he says. "The Fed sets interest rates based on whatever magic formulas they have, and then you ride the wave. You can't control the waves that you ride, but I see huge labor market weakness, and I see huge pricing pressure on the retail side."

Taylor doesn't foresee the picture changing much anytime soon. Li-Lac's costs have stayed manageable thanks to year-ahead contracts for chocolate and gift boxes, but they'll have to place another order after the holidays. If the Supreme Court upholds President Donald Trump's steep 'reciprocal tariffs,' Taylor expects a major jump in expenses. He's searched for U.S. suppliers with the same quality and reliability but hasn't found any.

He doesn't know if he can pass those higher costs along to his customers, either. Taylor first noticed a slump in sales back in August, which he mainly attributes to weaker tourism.

To stay afloat, he's implementing a hiring freeze for his 70 permanent employees and rethinking raises, after previously boosting pay an average of 25 percent over the past three years.

"If my costs increase on raw materials, I have to cut it somewhere, and I have to cut it in labor," he says. "I like to give good raises. It's cheaper to pay good people well than it is to pay mediocre wages."

Like many business owners, Taylor isn't planning layoffs yet, but he's bracing for the possibility. Chocolate prices have already quadrupled in four years. Every week another small chocolatier calls him looking to sell.

A tough economy forced this small business owner to close up shop

Hidden behind the numbers is also heartbreak. Nicole Panettieri had just finished teaching college students how to create a small business proposal when she realized it was time to say goodbye to one of her own.

Panettieri owns two boutiques in Astoria, Queens: The Brass Owl, a women's apparel and accessories shop that she opened in 2014, and The Tiny Owl, a toy and children's store she launched after the pandemic.

But her debts were piling up, her rent was rising faster than her sales and tariffs had pushed The Tiny Owl's costs up about 15 to 20 percent. When a Target opened around the corner, foot traffic died.

At the end of October, she'll close The Tiny Owl for good, laying off two employees and cutting hours for three more.

On the subway ride home from class, she cried for the first time.

"The day I told my team that it was gonna happen, it felt the most real," she says. "We all fought really hard to make it work. It feels like we all failed. There were too many obstacles for a business that's only three years old."

Motherhood and the experience of navigating city life with a newborn during the pandemic, changing diapers on park benches, inspired her to open the kids' store. She vowed to create a safe space for families that she never had. Toys quickly became her bestseller, making up more than half of her business. She had hopes of eventually expanding. Then, tariffs hit.

Prices jumped almost overnight. Vendors canceled shipments or delivered goods with duties higher than the cost of the order. She had no choice but to pass the increases on to customers. All the while, she watched as passersby outside carried shopping bags from her lower-priced national competitors around the neighborhood.

"Once prices are up, they're up," she says. "No one goes backwards."

Costs at her other shop have fared better, but sales are still down about 12 percent from last year. She's paused hiring, cut hours heading into the holidays and skipped raises for the first time in 11 years. To save The Brass Owl from the same fate, she launched a GoFundMe that's already raised nearly half its goal.

A year ago, she dreamed of opening a third store. She lives for the little moments, like watching kids around the neighborhood grow up. Once, a shopper told her she'd bought shoes from Panettieri's store for her first date and was now getting engaged. Now, she's debating whether to sell or close in a few years.

"You're part of people's lives, and I have the honor of seeing and talking to my customers," she says. "I'm not scared of a challenge. I love to work, and I probably overdo it, but I've gotten to a point where this is just exhausting and demoralizing. This year has beat me down."

Meet Saquan Taylor, an underemployed recent college graduate

The latest statistics have also missed people like Saquan Taylor, a 27-year-old jobseeker who keeps finding that the doors to better work are all closed.

Most days for Taylor follow the same pattern: wake up at 6:45am, work a full day as head teacher at a child care facility in Connecticut, hit the gym, eat dinner – and then, for two hours, scroll through job boards. He calls LinkedIn, Handshake and Glassdoor his "social media feeds."

Since earning his associate's degree in 2021, he's applied to roughly a thousand jobs. He's landed only six interviews.

Taylor has gotten so few responses to his applications back – 20 or 30, he estimates – that he doesn't even bother reading the emails in full anymore. He scrolls straight to the end to see a phrase that, at least so far, has always been there: "We regret to inform you that we have decided not to move forward with your application at this time."

"People want to work. They're just not being given the opportunity to work," he says. "Things are booming, the stock market is great, but it's only great for some people. If you're not financially well, then it's not great for you."

Taylor studied political science and hopes to work as a department head for a government agency one day. Federal job cuts, however, have made the field more competitive.

He's giving himself until December to find something new before moving back to New York City, where he hopes to find more opportunities. For now, he's living at home with his mom in Connecticut, paying down bills and his student loans.

Some days, the job search feels like a test of self-worth. That's when he'll remind himself of where he came from: a studio apartment shared with 13 family members after moving from Jamaica to New York. His mother worked multiple jobs and became the first in their family to buy a house – a drive he's tried to emulate.

Earlier this year, Taylor finished his bachelor's degree, graduating with honors from Central Connecticut State University, after originally having to drop out from a four-year university in 2020 for financial reasons.

"As the years went on, I saw my mom do things I'd really consider superhuman. Once she puts her mind to something, she's going to do it," he says. "You have to really trick yourself into believing that there is goodness out there and hoping for the better. I try to remain humble but also hopeful that there is a better day, and I'm doing what's necessary right now to make that day come true."

Stay patient and cut yourself some slack, this recruiter says

Kyle Rapaport has taken it upon himself to validate what other jobseekers are experiencing. Rapaport is a recruiter for companies in the supply chain industry, the epicenter of Trump's trade war. He spends his days trying to connect people who need jobs with companies who need workers. Lately, he feels as exhausted as the jobseekers he talks to.

Companies are pickier than ever, he says. He's seen some firms leave roles open for a year, passing up qualified candidates in hopes of finding a perfect one who'll check every box. Others, meanwhile, are motivated to hire one week, then a couple weeks later implement a hiring freeze after reevaluating their finances. Even in a tough market, he's still witnessed a stigma for hiring unemployed workers.

"Companies know they are in control of the market," he says. "It's really tough to see candidates that I work with posting on LinkedIn, week after week, just not being able to land a position for one reason or another. I want to help them. Trying to help them and not being able to can be really frustrating and really taxing."

Certified financial therapist Nate Astle has been starting to remind his clients that they should budget for fun in their emergency fund just as much as their necessities, knowing how much longer job searches are taking – and how emotionally challenging they can be.

"People say I have to distinguish between my needs versus wants, but wants are needs, and we need to have wants," Astle says. "If I have been used to a certain lifestyle where I can go to the movies if I need to and suddenly I can't, eventually I'm going to say, 'Screw it. I'm going to do whatever I want to do because I'm so sad and depressed.' We need to budget for that fun. It's the most important money we spend."

When Rapaport can't find someone a job, he'll do the next best thing that he thinks will help: listen and give advice. He frequently passes along resume feedback, interview or negotiation tips and just general encouragement. His best advice to jobseekers is to leverage your network and to just stay patient.

"If you are searching for a job in this market, especially if you are unemployed, you are going to get burnt out," he says. "There is so much rejection, and a lot of times, it's a job that you may be perfectly qualified for, but you'll just never hear back. Validate your own feelings, that this is very frustrating, but give yourself grace and know that you're not alone in going through this. There are thousands of candidates, if not even more, who are experiencing the same thing every single day. It's a matter of just continuing to fight through it."

Gary Arbach / Dreamstime / TNS

In a perfect world, no one would need to take out a loan to consolidate and pay off debt. In the real world, however, sometimes borrowing money is the only way to dig your way out.

When to use a personal loan to pay off credit card debt

By HOLLY D. JOHNSON
Bankrate.com (TNS)

In a perfect world, no one would need to take out a loan to consolidate and pay off debt. In the real world, however, sometimes borrowing money is the only way to dig your way out.

This is mostly due to high interest rates on credit cards. With the average credit card APR (annual percentage rate) at 20.01 percent as of October 2025, consumers are stuck paying significant sums of money in interest. Because of this, a small amount of their minimum payment actually goes towards paying down a credit card balance.

These challenges are why many people consider consolidating their credit card debt with a personal loan.

When to use a personal loan for credit card debt

Debt consolidation works by taking out a single loan to pay off multiple other debts. True, consolidating debt with a personal loan means trading one kind of debt for another. However, this strategy has advantages – if you can qualify for a personal loan with affordable interest rates and fair terms.

You can qualify for a lower interest rate

Qualifying for the best personal loan interest rates and terms typically requires a FICO score of 800 or higher. But you may get competitive (that is, close to average) rates with a score of 670 or higher.

Either way, personal loans come with average APRs of 12.25 percent as of October 2025. That's considerably lower than the current average credit card APR of 20.01 percent, meaning your interest savings can be substantial.

You can consolidate your debts into one payment

If you're juggling several credit cards with their own payments and APRs, it can be difficult to organize a debt repayment plan. You have to make sure you're making and maximizing your payments each month. Using a personal loan to pay off debt helps you get rid of multiple payments and go down to one payment per month – and hopefully with a much lower APR.

Consider using a debt repayment calculator to determine how much sooner you could pay off your debt with a lower interest rate.

Think about this simple example. Imagine you have $5,000 in debt on a credit card with a 17 percent APR and $7,000 in debt on a second credit card with a 21 percent APR. You are only able to put $100 towards each credit card per month with a total of $200 each month.

At that rate, you are not even paying off all of your interest, so you will never pay off the debts. If you can secure a personal loan for your total of $12,000 in credit card debt with an APR of 10 percent, you will be able to contribute your $200 each month and start paying off more than your interest each month.

You can secure a lower monthly payment

If you're struggling under the weight of your credit card debt and you are still spending more on payments each month than you earn, a personal loan with a lower APR and set repayment schedule may be exactly what you need.

It is possible you can secure a lower monthly payment on your consolidated debt with a lower APR and a long enough repayment timeline. You'll need to play around with a debt consolidation calculator to know for sure.

You want to know exactly when you'll be debt-free

One big problem with credit cards is if you keep using them for purchases, you may never pay off your debt. Personal loans, on the other hand, come with a fixed interest rate, a fixed monthly payment and fixed repayment schedule that dictates the exact date you'll pay off your debt for good.

If you're tired of making payments toward credit cards but never making much progress, you might be better off consolidating debt with a personal loan, and then switching to cash or debit cards.

When not to use a personal loan for credit card debt

Signing up for a personal loan to pay off credit cards can be a money-saving endeavor, but that's not always the case. Signs you may want to try a different debt consolidation method completely can vary from person to person, but they may include the following.

You have a small amount of debt you can pay off quickly

If you have a fairly manageable amount of debt that you can comfortably pay off within 12 to 21 months, you may want to consider signing up for a balance-transfer credit card instead of a personal loan to pay off debt. With a 0 percent APR credit card, you can frequently secure zero interest on balance transfers for up to 21 months, although a balance transfer fee will likely apply.

While balance transfer fees may cost up to 3 percent to 5 percent of your transferred balances upfront, you could easily save hundreds of dollars or more on interest if you pay down debt during your introductory offer. Some balance transfer credit cards also offer rewards and consumer benefits, so make sure to compare offers.

You are going to keep using the same spending habits

If most of your credit card debt is due to bad spending habits, consolidating your debt won't stop you from getting into more debt if you continue practicing bad spending behaviors.

You may want to rethink your financial strategy before you try to consolidate debt so that you can get a handle on your spending. Think about consulting a personal finance coach or learning about different budgeting methods. Find what works for you and make habits that will keep you out of debt in the long run before you try to tackle a symptom of your larger spending problem.

You desperately need help with your debt

Finally, there are times when you might have so much debt you feel powerless to pay it off without help. In these circumstances, it's possible working with a debt relief company or non-profit Consumer Credit Counseling Services may be your best bet. You can also look into debt management plans or debt settlement plans, although the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) warns that not all third-party companies offering debt relief help are reputable.

If you have so much debt that it seems mathematically impossible for you to pay it off in your lifetime, you might also be a candidate for bankruptcy. It can help to meet with a CCCS counselor before you decide. To weed out any bad players, the FTC says you should check out any agency you're considering with your state Attorney General and local consumer protection agency.

Other options for managing credit card debt

While using a personal loan to pay down credit card debt can be helpful, it's not the best choice for everyone. Some alternatives include:

- Balance transfers
- Debt management plans (DMPs)
- Settle your credit card debt

Bottom line

Imagine never having to pay a credit card bill again, or actually having the money you want to take a vacation or do something fun. By focusing on debt repayment, you can free up cash each month – even if your main goal is simply having some extra money to save.

A personal loan can make a lot of sense for debt consolidation, but make sure to consider all the options and tools that may be available to you.

Getting out of debt requires you to stop racking up more bills you can't pay. No matter which debt reduction option you choose, stop using credit cards and switch to cash or your debit card while you're in debt repayment mode.

Key takeaways

- Using a personal loan to pay off credit card debt could be a smart move if you can secure a lower rate or are juggling multiple credit card payments
- Paying off credit card debt with a personal loan may not be right for you if you're overwhelmed by debt
- Before you use a personal loan to pay off debt, review your spending habits

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FOOD

Baked apple cider doughnuts warm the soul

Cider apples make the best apple cider doughnuts.

Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

By GRETCHEN MCKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Did you ever have one of those days where you just need to do something, anything, to keep busy? That was me recently at my son's home in New Jersey.

My youngest grandson, just 4 months old, was headed the next day to the hospital for surgery. And like any grandma, I was on edge with worry.

Baking always is a great, meditative way to burn an hour or so. Measuring out ingredients requires focus and the aroma of something baking in the oven is an instant mood-lifter. So I thought, why not?

Since I come from a family of nurses, I also know that it's always nice to provide the medical staff that takes care of a loved one with something tasty. So I decided to make one of my favorite fall treats for my son and daughter-in-law to take along to the hospital: apple cider doughnuts.

Most everyone loves doughnuts, and in October, ones made with local apple cider and dusted with cinnamon sugar are a quintessential fall treat.

Dan reported back that the doughnuts were a hit, and thankfully, so was little Georgie's surgery.

About the doughnuts: If you choose a fried recipe, things can get messy pretty quickly. Also, you need pretty good temperature control because if the oil is too hot, the outside of the doughnuts will burn but the insides will still be raw and doughy; too cold, and the doughnuts will soak in too much oil and taste heavy.

If you bake them instead, they might not be as pillowy as their fried counterparts, but they're still a good, sweet treat.

This recipe from Sally's Baking Addiction is a favorite. Made with an apple cider reduction and dusted in a warm, seasonal mix of cinnamon and sugar, they embody everything people love about fall in sweet dough form.

The doughnuts are best warm, but they are also quite tasty at room temperature. Store leftovers in an airtight container at room temperature for up to three days.

Baked Apple Cider Doughnuts

Cooking the cider down concentrates its flavor so you need to add less to the batter. Be careful not to over-mix – you don't want the dough to produce gluten.

Scooping flour right out of the bag compacts it; for more precise measuring, spoon and level it instead.

1 1/2 cups apple cider
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
3/4 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon apple pie spice
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
1 large egg, at room temperature
1/2 cup packed light or dark brown sugar
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup milk, at room temperature
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

FOR TOPPING:
1 cup granulated sugar
3/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
3/4 teaspoon apple pie spice
6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

Reduce the apple cider: Stirring occasionally, simmer apple cider in a small saucepan over low heat until you're left with about 1/2 cup, about 20 minutes. If there are any spices or solids on top, leave them. Set aside to cool for 10 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Spray doughnut pan with non-stick spray. Set aside.

Make the doughnuts: Whisk flour, baking soda, baking powder, cinnamon, apple pie spice and salt together in a large bowl. Set aside.

Whisk melted butter, egg, brown sugar, granulated sugar, milk and vanilla extract together. Pour into dry ingredients, add reduced apple cider, and mix everything together with a whisk or spatula until smooth and combined (only until the flour disappears). Batter will be slightly thick.

Spoon the batter into the doughnut cavities, or use a large zipped-top bag with the corner cut off the bottom to pipe it into the pan. Fill each about halfway.

Bake for 10-11 minutes or until the edges and tops are lightly browned. To test, poke your finger into the top of the doughnut. If it bounces back, they're done. Cool for 2 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack. Re-grease the pan and bake the remaining batter.

Coat the doughnuts: Combine granulated sugar, cinnamon and apple pie spice together in a medium bowl. Once cool enough to handle, dunk both sides of each doughnut in the melted butter, then generously in the apple spice topping.

Doughnuts are best served immediately. Leftovers keep well covered tightly at room temperature for up to 3 days or in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

Makes 12-16 doughnuts, depending on pan.

sallysbakingaddiction.com

Sip into fall with these 3 flavor-packed cocktail recipes

By NICOLE HVIDSTEN
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

This time of year, it's hard not to succumb to the cozy flavors of fall. Pumpkin spice infuses everything from lattes to cereal, apples are everywhere and cinnamon and cardamom permeate both professional and home kitchens.

Cocktails are no exception. Bar menus add cinnamon sticks and rosemary to the garnish rotation, and cider drinks become standard sipping. Why not do the same at home with fall twists on favorite classic cocktails?

Steeping gin and white chocolate adds a fun twist to negronis. Brown sugar lends a caramel-like note to a standard mule (which already has a flavorful leg up with ginger beer), and using apple cider as a base for margaritas is autumnal genius.

The beauty about today's cocktail scene – both at home and in bars and restaurants – is that drinks can be just as delicious when made with nonalcoholic spirits. The prevalence of companies making solid NA alternatives to whiskey, gin, tequila and more, and stores that carry it, make it possible for these three recipes to be made as cocktails or mocktails. That way those who choose to not drink spirits can still get into the fall spirit.

Dreamstime / TNS

Boozy Bourbon Kentucky Mule Cocktail with Ginger Beer and Lime.

Brown Sugar Bourbon Mule

Serves 4

Brown sugar complements the smooth, sweet undertones of bourbon whiskey. Lime juice and ginger beer add a refreshing one-two punch. From "Autumn Spirits: Cozy Fall Cocktails & Drink Recipes" by Adams Media (Simon & Schuster, 2025).

1/4 c. light brown sugar
1/4 c. water
4 oz. (1/2 c.) bourbon whiskey
4 tbsp. lime juice
2 (12-oz.) bottles ginger beer
4 lime wedges

In a small saucepan over medium-high heat, bring brown sugar and water to a boil to make simple syrup. Stir constantly until brown sugar is dissolved, about 3 minutes. Set aside to cool for 20 minutes.

Fill four rocks glasses or copper mugs with ice. Add to each glass 1 ounce (2 tablespoons) whiskey, 1 ounce (2 tablespoons) brown sugar simple syrup, 1 tablespoon lime juice and 6 ounces ginger beer. Stir gently. Garnish with lime wedges before serving.

White Chocolate Negroni

Serves 2

Another drink that's been experiencing a renaissance lately, the negroni is a combination of gin, vermouth and bitter liqueur. Formulating a chocolate version was an especially fun challenge. How do you preserve the cocktail's quintessentially bitter nature while adding a layer of the sweet stuff? It took some experimentation, but the results – using a white chocolate–washed gin – are undeniably delicious. You will need to start this a day or two in advance to give the gin time to soak. From "For the Love of Chocolate" by Phillip Ashley Rix (Harper Celebrate, 2025).

FOR THE WHITE CHOCOLATE-WASHED GIN:
1 c. gin
1 c. white chocolate chips, chopped

FOR THE NEGRONI:
2 oz. (4 tbsp.) white chocolate–washed gin
2 oz. (4 tbsp.) sweet vermouth
2 oz. (4 tbsp.) Campari
2 large king ice cubes or ice spheres
Orange twist, for garnish

Prepare the white chocolate-washed gin: Combine the gin and chocolate in a pint mason jar. Screw the lid on tightly and shake vigorously to combine. Store in the refrigerator for 24 to 48 hours, shaking often, to let the flavors meld.

Strain the mixture, reserving the gin and discarding the chocolate.

Prepare the cocktails: In a shaker filled with ice, combine the gin, vermouth and Campari. Shake vigorously for 15 to 20 seconds until chilled.

Strain into two rocks glasses with large ice cubes. Garnish with orange and serve immediately.

Apple Cider Margarita

Serves 1

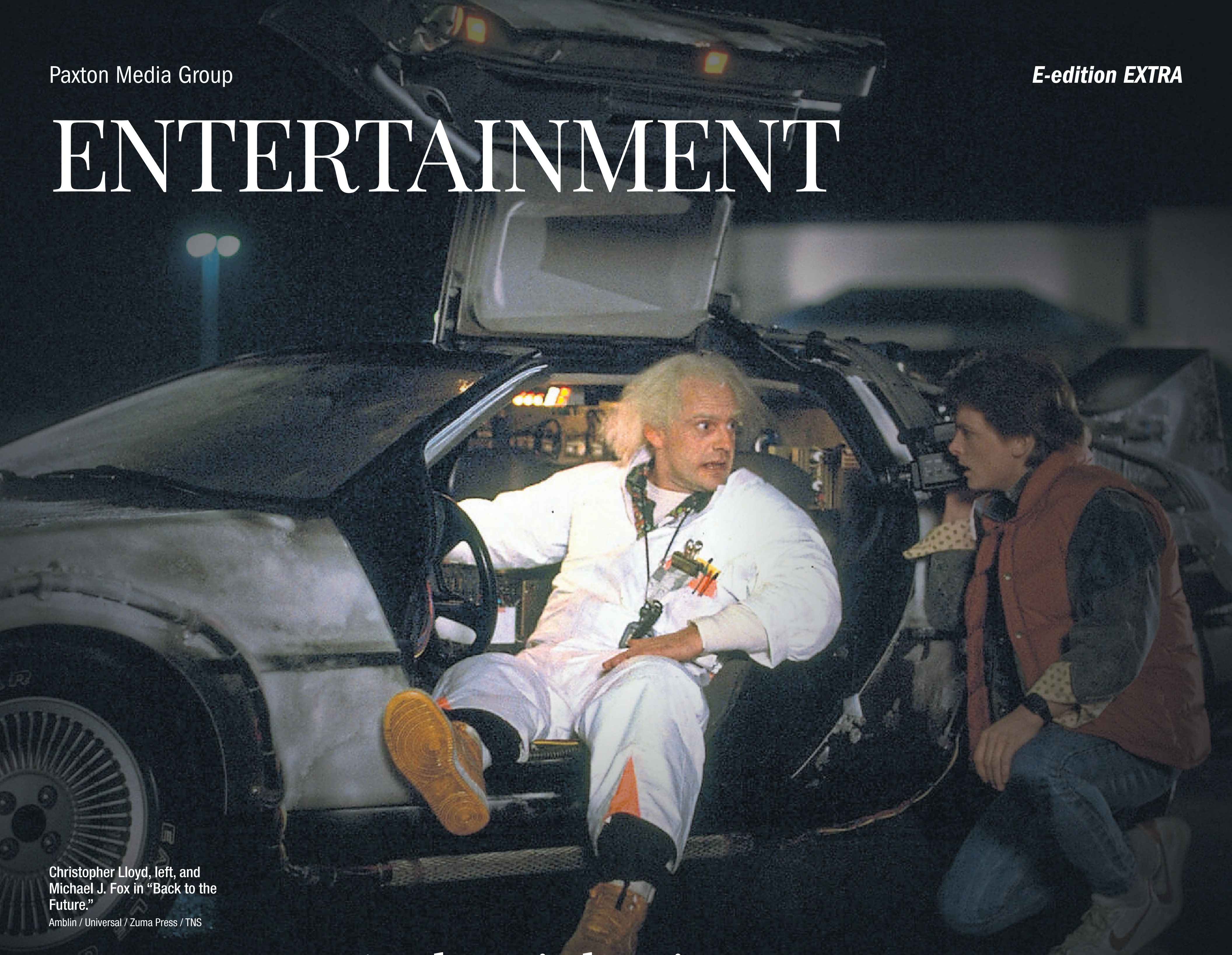
Here's a classic margarita with a seasonal twist. Adding apple cider and cinnamon to the traditional lime flavor creates an autumn-in-a-glass treat. From "Autumn Spirits: Cozy Fall Cocktails & Drink Recipes" by Adams Media (Simon & Schuster, 2025).

1 tbsp. cinnamon sugar
1 lime wedge
1 1/2 oz. (3 tbsp.) blanco tequila
1/2 oz. (1 tbsp.) triple sec
3 oz. (6 tbsp.) apple cider
1 oz. (2 tbsp.) lime juice
1 thin apple slice
1 cinnamon stick
1 small rosemary sprig

Spread cinnamon sugar in a shallow dish. Use the lime wedge to dampen the rim of a rocks glass and dip the rim in cinnamon sugar. Fill the glass with ice.

Fill a cocktail shaker with ice. Add tequila, triple sec, cider and lime juice.

Shake and strain into the prepared glass. Garnish with apple slice, cinnamon stick and rosemary sprig.



Christopher Lloyd, left, and Michael J. Fox in "Back to the Future."
Amblin / Universal / Zuma Press / TNS

It's the right time to go *'Back to the Future,'* blockbustering's most brilliant social satire

By AMY NICHOLSON
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

'Back to the Future" deserves to be endlessly rewound. Shot for shot, line for line, it's the modern era's zippiest comedy about the collapse of the American dream, with a sting that would have had its forefathers Frank Capra and Preston Sturges cheering: How the dickens did Robert Zemeckis get away with that?

And I'm not even talking about the sequel where the bullying mogul Biff Tannen turns downtown Hill Valley into a hellish Pleasure Paradise Casino & Hotel. All of the franchise's social satire is right there in the 1985 original, which returns to theaters this week to mark its 40th anniversary. "Back to the Future" just might be Hollywood's richest, cleverest blockbuster – and its attention to detail deserves to be re-celebrated.

Zemeckis, who co-wrote the screenplay with Bob Gale, must have been as much of a madman savant as Christopher Lloyd's Doc Brown to compress so much plot into every frame. "Back to the Future" opens with a traveling shot of Doc's garage apartment that tells the inventor's entire riches-to-rags life story, from the incineration of the Brown family mansion to his decision to sell off his 435-acre inheritance to developers who behaved only a bit better than Biff, before the camera circles down to his humble twin bed littered with past due bills and garbage from the Burger King next door, serving Whoppers on what was once his front lawn.

Squint and you'll spot even more narrative setup, including photos of Doc's personal heroes, which pointedly include Benjamin Franklin, the harnesser of lightning. Then a radio clicks on, blaring a commercial for a downtown Toyota dealership that we'll soon see once sold the American-made Studebaker. Then a TV news update about lost plutonium that concludes with the anchor parroting a fib from officials that the nuclear material wasn't stolen by terrorists, but was simply an internal clerical error – a lie that gets exposed a minute later when Marty McFly's skateboard rolls into its radioactive box. Next, Doc's Rube Goldberg-ian breakfast contraption whirs to action with burned toast and a glop of overflowing dog food, implying that he and his dog Einstein have themselves been missing for a while. As a child, I misinterpreted that mess to mean Doc was a lousy engineer. Whoops!

Plus, of course, we see the clocks. I couldn't tell you how many. Four dozen? Six dozen? And half of them allude to the character beats ahead. There are cheap tickers jumbled with antiques that must have survived the house fire. Barometric pressure timepieces able to foresee an electrical storm. Decorative animatronic clocks like the one in which a ceramic wino swigs booze, just as Marty's mother Lorraine (Lea Thompson) will chug in her sexy teen years and keep chugging until she's a depressive, 40-something alcoholic. A miniature Harold Lloyd dangles from a pair of watch hands just as Doc will at the climax.

And that's merely "Back to the Future's" first shot – a staggering pan with no cuts other than a quick close-up of Einstein's food bowl right after the credits announce the name of the cinematographer, Dean Cundey, who was also responsible for one of the other signature single-take sequences of the late 20th century, the around-the-house, through-the-kitchen, up-the-stairs-and-back-down-to-the-yard Steadicam tracking shot of 6-year-old Michael Myers murdering his sister at the beginning of John Carpenter's 1978 "Halloween."

Interestingly, Zemeckis and Gale hadn't yet brainstormed that brilliant introduction when they began shooting "Back to the Future" with its original star, Eric Stoltz, playing the time-traveling teenager Marty McFly. The Doc Brown garage sequence doesn't appear in the script until a draft dated February 1985, a month into reshooting the movie with Michael J. Fox. Those improvements testify to the true mark of genius: the drive to hone something good until you've engineered something great.

Of course, audiences don't always know genius when they see it. They did with "Back to the Future," which was the No. 1 film at the box office for 11 weeks. But Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life" took nearly 30 years to go from flop to hit – 1947 wasn't ready, but their kids loved it – and Capra himself was still alive that same summer of 1985 when the techno-innovator Ted Turner scooped up the rights to his classic and chucked it into the future by tinting it from black and white to color.

> **'Back To The Future'**
>
> **MPA rating:** PG
>
> **Running time:** 1:56
>
> **How to watch:** Now in theaters

"Even the villain looks pink and cheerful," Capra complained to the press. "The story, therefore, has been changed." Or, as Doc Brown might have yelped, changes could have disastrous consequences.

Advancement isn't linear or inevitable. Sometimes, as "Back to the Future" cynically implies, it backslides or gets stuck. Hill Valley Mayor Red Thomas blares the same verbatim reelection slogan in 1955 as Mayor Goldie Wilson does in 1985 – "Progress is his middle name" – yet the town is in visible decline.

Marty comes of age in the Hill Valley of 1985, where vandals have shellacked the high school with so much graffiti that the janitors seem to have given up. The town square is in tatters: the store awnings are torn, the windows boarded up and the park paved over into a parking lot. What remains is a wasteland of pawn shops, porn shops, adult theaters, biker bars and, yes, that Toyota dealership, a pointed inclusion during the '80s auto import war. Plus, the clock atop the courthouse hasn't worked since that thunderstorm three decades ago.

Not everything is the government's fault. Mayor Goldie, having worked his way up the ladder from busboy to civic leader, is trying to fix that clock so his citizens can use it. I must have watched "Back to the Future" a dozen times before I realized that the gray-haired preservationist bugging Marty to save the clock tower from its Black mayor is advocating to keep it broken for the sake of Hill Valley's "history and heritage."

Original script drafts were even bolder about portraying that activist, who Zemeckis and Gale described as a "church-group type woman," a dangerously Dark Ages zealot. In a deleted line, she appears to believe that a lightning bolt destroyed the clock tower as a symbol of God's will, gloating that the busted gears are a "landmark of scientific importance, attesting to the power of the Almighty."

Doc Brown would consider that blasphemy. Marty McFly gives her a quarter anyway.

The kid doesn't cross-examine his town's decay. He's always lived in Bedford Falls – er, Hill Valley – and while his puffy red vest gets him mistaken for a sailor, he behaves more like a frog in an already boiling pot. When Jimmy Stewart crash-landed in an alternative timeline, he was aghast at the economic disparity. But like an actual teenager, Marty is so obliviously preoccupied by his quest to get back to his pretty girlfriend that he makes it all the way to the end of the film without commenting on how bad he and the rest of his Pepsi Light generation have it.

The film obliges Marty's myopia, rarely zooming in on the '80s rot, or for that matter, lingering on the benefits of the Eisenhower era when the middle class was booming, income inequality was shrinking and groups like the Kiwanis, the YWCA and Optimist International proudly slapped their emblems on the Welcome to Hill Valley greeting sign, pitching in together to build a better neighborhood.

There are a few clues that this seeming stability has cracks. The casual racism and sexual harassment go beyond puerile Biff. Not only is it awful when Biff jams his meaty hands up Lorraine's petticoat, but who the heck is that other dweeb fondling her on the Enchantment Under the Sea dance floor?

Humming along under the surface are smaller signs of community breakdown, like when Lorraine's father, Sam, rolls out a brand new TV set while the family eats dinner, thus curtailing chit-chat forever. A moment later, Sam scoffs incredulously at the idea that any household would ever be rich or bored enough to need two television sets. Zemeckis lets that line land like the punchline it is. But it's also a test. Will Marty – will we – key into the bigger story underneath this adventure, the one in which the whole town, maybe the whole country, is going downhill faster than a speeding DeLorean?

No matter how many times I rewatch "Back to the Future," I find more touches to admire, more questions to mull. Marty spends a whole week flitting between the '80s and the '50s, never fully absorbing what the differences between those decades mean. Zemeckis hopes the audience will ask the follow-ups that Marty ignores.

What happened to the four salaried employees manning the Texaco service station and why are his parents' childhood homes nicer than his own? What would after-school dates with his girlfriend be like if, instead of awkwardly perching on a sidewalk bench, they could relax at a cheap and cheerful diner or a first-run movie house? Why shouldn't their town square prioritize strolling couples and amateur oil painters and kids tossing softballs over parking meters and hatchbacks?

Yet, when Marty zips back to 1985 to see a police helicopter circling overhead and the Essex marquee promoting a fictional adult film, the first thing he says is, "Everything looks great!"

Actually, that's not true. The very first thing he says is, "Fred, you look great!" to a homeless man napping under a pile of newspapers. Happy endings never felt so bleak.

"Back to the Future's" astonishing production design is by Lawrence G. Paull, who was 17 himself in 1955 – the same age as George McFly. Unlike Zemeckis (who was a toddler), Paull lived the exact arc of the film, coming to the project with a background in architecture that trained him to think holistically about fictional cities. Paull's neo-futuristic visions of a 2019 Los Angeles had recently earned him an Oscar nomination for "Blade Runner," justly applauded as a dystopian masterpiece. But I'd argue his subtler work on "Back to the Future" is as incisive and cutting, since it acknowledges that the dystopia is already here.

Of course, Doc Brown never planned for anyone to go back to the past. He'd simply typed in the date he invented time travel for a few fleeting seconds of nostalgia, intending all the while to ditch his teen sidekick and zoom away to explore the 21st century.

"I've always dreamed of seeing the future," Doc says with glee, "Looking beyond my years, seeing the progress of mankind."

Nobody spoil what comes next.

MOVIE REVIEW

Kimberly French / Mubi / TNS

Jennifer Lawrence, left, and Robert Pattinson in "Die My Love."

Lynne Ramsay's *'Die My Love'* a primal scream of maternal rage

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay's long-awaited fifth feature, "Die My Love," poses a provocative question under the guise of a mental health crisis: can a wild woman be domesticated? Immediately, she hints at her answer, but the audience doesn't know it yet. We watch a young couple, Grace (Jennifer Lawrence) and Jackson (Robert Pattinson) move into a new home and start to play house. What happens after that is so wild and unpredictable that we almost forget that where it ends up is where it was always going.

"Die My Love" is the product of the union between three daring women: Jennifer Lawrence, star and producer, writer Ariana Harwicz, whose 2012 novel about a young mother spinning out in rural France Lawrence received from Martin Scorsese, and Ramsay, a visionary artist of intensely evocative imagery; an unyielding architect of cinematic despair and joy in equal measure. Ramsay adapted the novel with Enda Walsh and Alice Birch, and directed, with Lawrence in the lead role. The result is a ragged primal scream of a film – not a cry for help, but rather, a bellow of maternal rage.

Grace is a writer. In their new home, the house where his Uncle Frank lived and died, Jackson suggests she write "the Great American Novel," while he might record an album. The possibilities are somehow endless in this decrepit, abandoned house, which they fill with their young life, including baby Harry.

But the only ink Grace spills there is an abstract galaxy, spattered across a page mixed with her own breast milk, a creative output that blends her two identities, now at war. She can't write, can't create, aside from her own son, can't nurture. All she can do is destroy.

One of the first indelible images Ramsay conjures is of Grace crawling through the grass, wielding a large knife, carelessly batting overgrown weeds, while Jackson swigs from a bottle of beer, baby Harry bouncing next to a grocery store birthday cake. It's a happy, if rumpled 6-month birthday celebration, a scene of seemingly contented but strange domesticity that thrums with an uneasy air of danger.

> **'Die My Love'**
>
> ★★★
>
> **MPA rating:** R (for sexual content, graphic nudity, language, and some violent content)
>
> **Running time:** 1:58
>
> **How to watch:** In theater

Grace's playfully feral wantonness is funny and bewitching, but her schtick loses its luster for Jackson, who takes a job that keeps him away from home, leaving her with the baby. When he doesn't respond to her entreaties she lashes out: sarcastic, petulant, loose-limbed and impulsive, like a child.

She is under-stimulated, restless, and losing her mind. He is immature (he brings home a random dog) and ill-equipped to handle the angry goddess he finds himself sleeping next to – at least he's appropriately awed by and afraid of her. His mother Pam (Sissy Spacek), grieving her husband and navigating her own loss of identity as a wife, assures Grace that going "a little loopy" is normal in the first year. But Pam could never anticipate how loopy Grace will get.

She's deep in the throes of postpartum psychosis, either horny or hallucinating, and often both, a harrowing surreality into which Ramsay plunges us. We can never really tell what's "real" in "Die My Love," a film where where timelines and dreamscapes and memories and fantasy collapse in on themselves again and again, but it's real to Grace, and that's all that matters, cinematically.

This is a symbolic, emotional and physical journey through a woman's broken subconscious; a subjective voyage, not a logical one. Her mind disconnected, Grace revels in her body: dancing, crawling, masturbating restlessly just to feel something, fantasizing about a mysterious biker (LaKeith Stanfield) who drives past their house. Driven only by impulse and id, what makes sense to Grace is play, sex, pain, love, adrenaline.

Lawrence and Pattinson are both incredible physical actors, existing wholly in their bodies here. Lawrence propels herself through space like a woman possessed, and Ramsay underscores her mysterious inner drive with music and rhythm, letting songs illustrate Grace's moods and whims, from the innocent to the romantic to the punishing.

This film is not an easy watch, provoking anxiety, discomfort and even judgment about parenting and motherhood. Her love for her son is never in question, but Grace is a wild animal, and it is at times terrifying to be asked to dive into the cracked psyche of a brilliant but troubled mind with such immediacy and presence. How do you solve a problem like Grace? You can't. She's not a problem that wants to be solved.

Ramsay assembles Lawrence's fearsome and fully embodied performance, sound, image, and this story of frustrated female pain into a pile of tinder and then lights a match. When Grace finally takes a clear-eyed look at what's available to her in this situation, she burns it all down, and the incendiary "Die My Love" suggests that it's only choice available to her.

SERIES REVIEW

'Crutch,' Tracy Morgan's feel-good comedy series, has a strong cast that lifts familial jokes

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Tracy Morgan has fetched up in a multicamera, filmed-before-a-live-audience situation comedy, "Crutch." Premiering Monday on Paramount+, it's a cousin, in textual and corporate terms, to the CBS sitcom "The Neighborhood," from which it has been spun off, and though it includes some words you can't say on broadcast TV and has a streaming-length, eight-episode season, it's for all intents and purposes a network sitcom – good-hearted, familial and even less risqué than most.

Seven seasons of "30 Rock" have firmly conflated Morgan in my mind with Tracy Jordan, the character he played there, a personage so singular one would think it must somehow be an accurate depiction of the actual Morgan. "We're a team now," Tracy says to Tina Fey's Liz Lemon in that series' opening episode, "like Batman and Robin, like chicken and a chicken container." I can't imagine any other actor getting away with that line. Obviously, there's more to Morgan than Jordan – he's a stand-up comic, has been in a lot of movies and was a "Saturday Night Live" cast member from 1996 to 2003. The 2018 TBS dramatic comedy "The Last O.G." lasted four seasons – it also featured "The Neighborhood" star Cedric the Entertainer – and cast Morgan as an ex-con, reckoning with a gentrified Brooklyn after 15 years in prison.

JoJo Whilden / Paramount+ / TNS

Tracy Morgan stars as Francois "Frank" Crutchfield in Paramount+'s "Crutch."

Here he plays Francois "Crutch" Crutchfield, widower, father and grandfather and the owner of a Harlem flooring company. Morgan had guested on "The Neighborhood" as the brother of Cedric's character; in "Crutch," he's become a cousin, with a few appearances by Cedric to cement the relationship. (Arsenio Hall and a very funny Deon Cole also make guest appearances.) Jealous of his peace and his space, and his money, he's looking forward to the time when "I can finally do me" – plans that are upset with the unexpected return of his adult children to the nest. (Sitcom premise No. 310.)

Son Jake (Jermaine Fowler), having graduated Columbia Law School at the top of his class and passed the bar on his first try, decides to quit his high-paying job at a corporate firm to work for Legal Aid, leaving a fancy Manhattan apartment – with free parking – to move back home. (It's a unilateral decision.) Daughter Jamilah (Adrianna Mitchell), newly (and for a moment, secretly) separated from her husband, arrives from Minnesota for an indefinite visit with her children, Lisa (Braxton Paul) and Mase (Finn Maloney). Not technically living at Crutch's but around all the time (she scores a key in the opening episode) is his sister-in-law, Antoinette (Kecia Lewis), called Toni, an acerbic bird-watching corrections officer, with whom Crutch trades insults like Sherman Hemsley and Marla Gibbs in "The Jeffersons," if not quite at that level of wit. (Toni: "For somebody who ate as many lead chips as you, you did pretty good"; Crutch: "Why don't you stop flapping your gums and flap your wings back to your cave?") Well, it's a big brownstone, and it's convenient to have as many characters as possible on a single set.

Rounding out the company is Adrian Martinez as Flaco, "the manager, sales associate, customer service rep [and] HR" at Crutch's flooring store, a sweet, sensitive goof. Luenell recurs as Miss Pearl, who looks down from a neighboring building on Crutch's rooftop garden – a wonderful set, from production designer Katie Akana – tossing out comments like a drunk Muppet: "This body broke up New Edition" and "Every time y'all on that roof, it's drama. This better than that dragon s---."

Unlike Morgan's "Last O.G." character, Crutch hasn't been out of circulation, but, like many television fathers, he lives in a generational bubble, and there is a modicum of Kids These Days and What's the World Coming To humor, along with nostalgic references to Doug E. Fresh and the Fat Boys ("Today they'd be called the Plus-Sized Boys," says Flaco). There's a sweet scene in which Crutch and Flaco give Minnesota-raised Lisa and Mase lessons in how to ride the subway; an episode in which Jamilah tries too hard to get the kids into a theater camp; adventures in bird-watching with Toni and Jake; a visit to prison to confront a convict (Cole) "so confident when he robbed bodegas he would feed the cat on the way out." Becky Ann Baker, who was Jean Weir on "Freaks and Geeks" plays another maternal Midwesterner as Jamilah's mother-in-law, Kathy, who is popular with everyone.The question here is whether a show can be funny if the jokes are … not great or kind of hacky. And the answer seems to be it can, if the actors are amusing apart from what they're made to say, and the situations sufficiently engaging, and you are flexible with your definition of "funny" – that is, if you don't need to be laughing all the time. That said, this is an appealing series, running on love and goodness and right behavior, with a host of likable performers, Morgan especially, who has the quality of being at once devilish and angelic, a grumbling saint. That Crutch, for all his bluster, is a softy, is a point the series explicitly makes. Called upon to share his feelings, he says: "In my days, men just held it in." "That's why they all died at 56," replies Jake. (Morgan is 56.)

But feelings will be shared.

Jón Þór “Jónsi” Birgisson, left, and Georg “Goggi” Holm of Sigur Ros perform on stage during the 33rd edition of the Eurockeennes de Belfort music festival in Sermamagny, France, on June 29, 2023.
Jean-Christophe Verhaegen / AFP / Getty Images / TNS

Straight Outta Reykjavik! Sigur Ros chills on orchestral tour

‘We are so lucky!’

By GEORGE VARGA
The San Diego Union-Tribune (TNS)

SAN DIEGO — The list of accomplishments by Sigur Ros, Iceland’s most successful band of all time, keeps growing, 31 years after its then-teenaged members first came together in Reykjavik.

It includes: appearances on “The Simpsons” and “Game of Thrones”; collaborations with Radiohead, famed choreographer Merce Cunningham and the Los Angeles Philharmonic; worldwide album sales of 10 million despite lyrics that are mostly in Icelandic; and performances at such storied concert venues as the Hollywood Bowl, Toronto’s Massey Hall and London’s Alexandra Palace.

“We still pinch ourselves,” said Sigur Ros bassist and co-founder Georg “Goggi” Holm. “We are so lucky and privileged to travel the world and play shows for people that want to come and see us.”

Those people are on multiple continents, as evidenced by Sigur Ros’ concert calendar from earlier this year.

Between this February and the first week of October, the band performed multiple dates in such capital cities as Tokyo, Taipei, Singapore, Sydney, Prague, Vienna, Rome, Tallinn, Brussels, Paris, London and Amsterdam.

The group’s current fall tour – which includes multiple dates in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Mexico City – is almost entirely sold out. All the performances are with a 41-piece orchestra that includes first violinist Laura Lutzke, a key member of the American Contemporary Music Ensemble and co-leader of the French orchestra Le Cercle de L’Harmonie. Each concert on the tour is being conducted by Robert Ames, the co-artistic director of the London-based Contemporary Orchestra.

“It’s been great getting to know Robert better and working with him and all these orchestras that we meet around the world,” Holm said. “It’s not always perfect, but it doesn’t matter.”

Sigur Ros’ website indicates the band will be accompanied by New York’s acclaimed Wordless Orchestra. But bringing that acclaimed New York ensemble on the road would be a costly undertaking at any time, let alone now, when touring expenses soar higher almost by the week. Instead, local regional musicians have been hired to perform under the Wordless Orchestra banner in each city on the tour.

“Everywhere we go, it’s a different orchestra,” said Holm, who does not read music. “There’s so many elements to this, so many spokes on the wheel, that it’s different every single night.”

The tour finds Sigur Ros showcasing music from 2023’s “Átta,” the group’s eighth studio album and its first since 2013’s atypically darker and more assertive “Kveikur.” The tour also features reimagined songs from the 2005 Sigur Ros album “Takk…” along with “Starálfur,” a standout song from its second album, 1999’s “Ágætis byrjun.”

A natural fit

The orchestral collaborations are a natural fit for Sigur Ros, whose often ethereal music brims with moody, slow-building crescendos and lends itself to added instrumental textures. For some fans, these concerts may well be the first time they are experiencing a live orchestral performance.

“I would definitely agree,” Holm said. “I think a lot of people come to our show and maybe expect something different than what it is, which is great. If I go to a show, I love surprises. And I think we’re using the orchestra in a different way and it’s not just this ‘post-rock band with an orchestra.’

“It’s more of a whole experience. We’re not a band with a backup orchestra. We’re playing together and doing songs differently and orchestrating them differently. We’re playing songs that we’ve not played for years in a completely different way than we’ve ever played them before.”

True to his word, when Holm and his Sigur Ros bandmates – multi-instrumentalist Kjartan Sveinsson and guitarist and singer Jón Þór “Jónsi” Birgisson – perform with an orchestra, the three musicians are not together front and center. Instead, each of them is positioned on different parts of the stage in the midst of the orchestra, the better to emphasize that all of the performers are part of a collective unit.

“Yeah, absolutely, we are integrated into the orchestra,” Holm said. “Before we started this tour, things were a little up in the air. We didn’t really know how we were gonna do this. We just started off by setting up the orchestra traditionally, and then we just squeezed in with the orchestra and we can feel it. When I’m playing, a lot of times, I’ll be looking at the cellos and I can see the brass section. Like you say, it’s not just us in the front, asking the orchestra to follow us. A lot of times, I am following the orchestra. It’s very fluid and flowy, and it can vary quite a lot.”

Holm spoke at length in a Google meeting from his home in Iceland last month.

He discussed the importance of musical mistakes (“Wrong is strong!”) and of “happy accidents.” He reflected on how thrilling it was for the young Sigur Ros to make an impact beyond its homeland. And he beamed broadly when asked about the Jimmy Lavelle-led San Diego band the Album Leaf, which opened several tours for Sigur Ros in the early 2000s (“Jimmy is a lifelong friend.”).

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: In a 2002 San Diego Union-Tribune interview, you were asked about Sigur Ros’ approach to creating music. You replied: “We go in and start playing. We do not discuss our music. We just do it. We don’t know when we’re finished. We just plug in our instruments and start playing. We just go with the flow of it and let it happen.” Now that the band is 23 years older, how similar or different is your approach to music? What has stayed the same? What has changed?

HOLM: That was a long time ago! I might not use the exact same words now, but that general sort of idea still applies. We do still just walk into a room and start playing. It’s usually something where there will be a little spark of something, a riff or even a sound, that inspires us to continue working on it and create the full song out of it.

Sometimes we’ll work on something like that for a really long time, find out it just doesn’t work and we’ll leave it alone. Sometimes it happens quickly and writes itself. But we’ve never been very good at someone bringing a piece of music to the table, and saying: “Oh, I wrote this song. Let’s play it.” That doesn’t seem to be part of our approach.

Q: In 2002, Sigur Ros had been together for eight years. Were any of you then thinking music would be a lifetime career?

HOLM: Good question, and a tough one to answer. I do remember that time period. A lot of things were happening. We were touring extensively. We were making records. It was a lot of work back in those days. I’m not saying there’s not a lot of work today, but now, we’ve kind of settled into it and know our limits. But did we know we were going to be doing this as a life project, or not? I think by that time, we probably did know.

I think we probably thought: “This is what we’re doing. This is our job now.” We were young and maybe we felt a little bit invincible, as you do when you’re younger. We were happy this was our job. We’ve always felt very lucky.

Q: The song “Klettur” on the most recent Sigur Ros album sounds like it could happily have gone on for 12 minutes, not 6-1/2 minutes. How did the band decide when and how the song should end? Or did it end itself, so to speak?

HOLM: When we write the songs, they usually dictate themselves a little bit. They usually go in the direction they want. And we did try to steer the album in different directions as well. A lot of the songs we thought would probably end up one way ended completely different. We did a lot of experiments with putting more beats on songs. And if they wanted to be rock and roll, or if they wanted to be electronic, there’s a lot of elements we added to some of the songs that we ended up taking off.

There was a lot of layering and then taking away the layers again. A lot of the songs on this record are also songs that, as soon as we recorded orchestrations, we thought we could mute everything we played and just leave the orchestra, and the song would be beautiful that way. So, I think the songs do go where they want. But a lot of times, it takes us a long time to make them sound the way we want.

Q: To what degree does what some musicians call the “happy surprise” come into play, where you’re working on something and have an idea in mind, but the music ends up going someplace unexpected that is better than what you were going for?

HOLM: That’s something that we absolutely love, the happy surprises, the happy accident, the happy mistakes. You make a mistake on a take (while recording), but it kind of sounds like it’s meant to be there. We love those things, and we tend to leave them in. We try to leave them in unless they are just stupid mistakes.

If it’s a musical mistake, it’s great. It’s a little bit like when we’re playing live, and you realize you’re making a mistake. You might be in a different spot in the song than everyone else. We call it: “Wrong and strong!” Just be wrong and strong. Just do it. Do it like it’s meant to be there. And we love that it’s absolutely a part of music.

Every time you play, it should be a unique experience. And when you do it on record, obviously you want to do it as well as you possibly can, and really, really focus. There’s a lot of mistakes on our records that no one else will actually realize are mistakes. We know they are mistakes, but they sound like they’re supposed to be there.

Q: In 2003, I interviewed a countryman of yours, Henrik Bjornson of the band Singapore Sling. He told me: “When we started, everyone in Iceland was doing post-rock, and I was really sick of it. So, all of these (expletive) post-rock bands who sound like Sigur Ros influenced me, in that I wanted to do the opposite. I guess a lot of Icelandic bands have been quite quirky, although I think that is changing.” How influential has Sigur Ros been in Iceland?

HOLM: At the time, I think he was right. Henrik is definitely known for going his own way and he’s a strong character, that’s for sure. And, absolutely, there were bands in Iceland that sounded post-rock. After we started playing, there was this wave of music that sounded kind of, for lack of a better word, cute.

But we would never associate ourselves with that sort of thing. Because we like our music also to be quite dark and moody, and dusty and gritty, at the same time. We have beautiful moments, but it’s not the same as “cute.” Today, there is a lot of hip-hop in Iceland, so I don’t think there’s many bands playing today that sound like us there. But I hope we inspired bands to think that they could go further with their music than Iceland. I hope more people got that out of what we were doing than from our music itself.

Q: Two current Icelandic music artists, Laufey and Of Monsters and Men, are doing quite well internationally. But when Sigur Ros started in the mid-1990s, apart from the Sugarcubes and Bjork, there weren’t any homegrown role models you could look to. I don’t mean musically, but in terms of people who were able to have an impact beyond Iceland. How important was it to you that some artists, who lived almost around the block from you, had made an impact?

HOLM: I think what Bjork did was absolutely an inspiration. And she proved you could be from a little island in the North Atlantic and do something that has so much impact. She got her music out there to so many people and did it in completely her own way, without copying anything. She stayed true to herself and that was definitely an inspiration.

When we were starting out, to go abroad and play a few shows and meet with record labels and things like that, it felt quite surreal to us. We were like: “Where is this gonna go?” But we always thought if we just stay true to ourselves and do what we enjoy doing, then it doesn’t matter how far. At the same time, it was super exciting. In 2000, we wouldn’t have dreamed we could be headlining shows around the world. One year later, we were playing in Japan! It’s been quite amazing.

Why Nicole Scherzinger is *'not just a puppet anymore'*

By MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Four months after she won a Tony Award for leading actress in a musical for her blood-soaked portrayal of Norma Desmond in "Sunset Boulevard," Nicole Scherzinger is sitting in the room where she willed her triumph into being.

"I manifested it right here," she says as she waves an arm around the cozy cabaret tucked inside the Sun Rose hotel on – where else? – Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood.

In 2022, the singer and actor best known as the leader of the Pussycat Dolls put on a series of intimate concerts at the Sun Rose designed to showcase the musical-theater skills she'd been honing since she was a kid growing up in Louisville, Kentucky. Word got around the entertainment industry, and soon Scherzinger was cast as the star of a radically stripped-down revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber's early-'90s melodrama about a washed-up (and murderous) movie star.

The musical, directed by Jamie Lloyd as a kind of blunt-force digital nightmare, played London's West End before moving last year to Broadway for a 10-month run that brought Scherzinger rave reviews along with theater's highest honor. Ahead of a recent concert at Walt Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles, the 47-year-old looked back on the experience as she sipped hot water and munched discs of raw ginger. She wore a Gucci sweatsuit and heels.

Q: Your gig here was you saying, "Put me in, Coach."

A: Basically I was telling people, "Hey, can I audition for this movie musical? Can I audition for this live TV musical?" People wouldn't even give me a shot – they only knew me from the pop side. So I was like, OK, let me educate everyone on who I am and what my real love language is, which is the stage.

Q: Give me an example of something you weren't allowed to audition for.

A: They wouldn't see me for "Cats." But that ended up being a blessing.

Q: You're talking about the crummy movie version from 2019.

A: That was God protecting me.

Q: I recently talked to Josh Groban, who told me about the difference between the Grammys and the Tonys. He said the Grammys are all about competition but that everyone at the Tonys is genuinely supportive of one another because they all know how hard live theater is.

A: I couldn't have said it any better. I'll still try to. Broadway is not for the faint of heart. You're not doing it for a camera or a post – you're just working your ass off literally every night for the passion and the love and for those couple thousand people in the theater. The music industry is dog-eat-dog – you're just trying to stay relevant. The Broadway community, they don't give a s--- about relevancy. They give a s--- about art and about your work ethic.

Q: Take me back to your final "Sunset" performance in July.

A: Other than my mother's two successful open-heart surgeries, that was the greatest day of my life.

Q: Better than winning the Tony?

A: Believe you me, I wanted that Tony. And I worked for it – I sacrificed everything for Norma Desmond in that production. But the Tony was out of my hands. Doing the show – I mean, what a blessing to be able to reveal all of you – your most vulnerable, your ugliest parts. Only in the theater can you do that. You can't do that in the music industry.

Q: Jamie Lloyd told Variety that you were "utterly without vanity" in the show. Accurate?

A: My God, did you see what the hell I looked like? From Day 1, I was showing him what heels I wanted to wear, what specific leopard print I wanted for my bedazzling caftans. And when he introduced the cameras, I was like, "No, no, no – you have to only do this side. Do you want greatness or mediocrity?" But all that had to go out the door. I had to chip away at all of that vanity so that people could see the truth. That's when art matters. And I loved it. There's so much freedom in not giving a s--- about what you look like.

Q: Onstage, sure. But you're also a famous person walking around the world. How do you preserve that mindset at Ralph's?

A: It's called sunglasses and a hat.

Q: Your success in "Sunset Boulevard" clearly vindicated that feeling you had when people weren't taking you seriously for musicals. But what if you'd taken this role about a Hollywood has-been and the show flopped?

A: It would never have flopped. That's not how I work.

Q: You can't control everything.

A: Say it didn't go over. It doesn't matter because we knew – Jamie and I and that company – we knew what we had uncovered. I knew when Jamie said, "Just read the script – read the lines on the page." As out-there and as character-y as Norma seemed to everyone else, she made complete sense to me. And I felt like her story hadn't been told in the way that I could tell it. I wanted to bring a real human aspect whereas maybe in the past, especially with Gloria Swanson, it had been told from someone else's perspective: "Oh, she's crazy, bewildered, far-fetched." I was like, "No, she's misunderstood."

Q: "Sunset Boulevard" thinks pretty deeply about celebrity and what it does to a person. Did it make you think about how celebrity has changed since you got in the game?

A: It's so different – there's no mystery. And it feels like anybody can be a celebrity now. You don't have to have real art or craft to be famous or even revered.

Q: Is that good? Bad? Neither?

A: I don't think it's great. The phone changed everything. There's just too much noise out there – too many distractions.

Q: The phone also changed the access people have to the famous.

A: It's an all-access pass. And you feel like you have to join that or else you're not gonna be a part of it because somebody else next door is willing to give it all, show it all, tell it all.

Q: The hubbub last year over the Russell Brand photo illustrates that, right? He posted a red Trump-style hat that said "Make Jesus First Again," and you asked where you could get one. Backlash ensued.

A: I think that's just horrible. I've said it before: I wish you could cancel cancel culture. I've never been a political person, and boy, did that bite me in the butt. The only time I've been political is when I campaigned for Obama [in 2008].

Q: That's not nothing.

A: But it's not my forte. I'm not educated. It just feels so divisive to me.

Q: Couple questions about the Pussycat Dolls. What's the status of your legal dispute with Robin Antin, who founded the group, over a proposed reunion?

A: Our lawsuit is settled. That should have never happened. That was an unfortunate mistake on someone's part – not mine. However, time heals things, and grace is always beautiful in life. I'm very positive and, dare I say, excited for the possibilities to come on the horizon.

Q: In some ways, the group strikes me as the epitome of early-2000s pop. I don't know that you could have the Dolls today.

A: You couldn't and you shouldn't. People have evolved, and there's so much more freedom and inclusion and acceptance. The original conception of the Dolls, it came from a time when women would dress up and be pretty for the men. That's what was sexy, right? Today, sexiness is to be sexy for yourself. Strength means accepting yourself, not pretending you're strong for someone else.

If I was gonna do the Dolls again, it would have to make sense to me now, and I can't go back to what things were before. I actually wrote a song about it called "Never Going Back." I've come way too far to go backwards, and I'm not just a puppet anymore. I'm 87 years old now, and I know my f------ s---, OK?

Q: Sounds like a reunion would mean a total overhaul. In that case, why bother?

A: Because the songs are too good. That's what's so great about nostalgia. If I had the time, I'd be the first one to go to a New Kids on the Block concert. "The Right Stuff," "Please Don't Go Girl" – those songs!

Q: What was the Pussycat Dolls' finest musical moment?

A: "Stickwitu." That gave us a Grammy nomination.

Q: Best pop performance by a duo or group with vocals. This was the 2007 Grammys. You lost to the Black Eyed Peas' "My Humps."

A: Which was written for me.

Q: Will.i.am has said he offered you a spot in the group.

A: Will is my brother in this industry. He was there when I auditioned for the Pussycat Dolls, and before the Dolls he asked me to be a part of the group. It just didn't feel right, and it wasn't meant to be because Fergie was the perfect Pea and I was meant to lead the Pussycat Dolls. But he wrote that song for the Dolls.

Q: You've put in a lot of time as a judge on singing shows: "The Sing-Off," "The X Factor," "The Masked Singer."

A: Even now: "Building the Band."

Q: You ever worry that work might dull your skills as a performer?

A: Jamie Lloyd, when he got me in the studio the very first week, he said, "You are one of the greats, and I never want to see you on one of those shows again." I was like, "Well, honey, I take care of my family, and I ain't come from no money." They pay the bills.

Q: If you were to make a Nicole Scherzinger album right now, what kind of record would it be?

A: I'd love to do a musical theater album because of these concerts that I've been doing – just songs that I love, songs that have always spoken to me, roles that I never had the opportunity to play. But I've also been writing a lot, and so I pretty much have that album.

Q: And?

A: It's pop, but it's pop with edge. Some of it's more dance, some of it's more singer-songwriter. If I were to call it right now, I'd call it "Warrior." It's a lot of empowering anthems.

Q: Do you sense an audience for that?

A: The entire world! Who doesn't want music that makes a change? Who doesn't want music that's gonna inspire you through the dark times? One of the biggest things in the world right now is "KPop Demon Hunters." Listen to the lyrics of those songs and what they're saying – it's all uplifting. It's not cheesy.

Q: I'd say "KPop Demon Hunters" is a little cheesy.

A: No, that is cheesy – that's full-on global-phenomenon Swiss cheese. We all want a slice of that. What I'm saying is that my music isn't cheesy. It's not preachy – it's real s---.

Q: You don't need me to tell you that pop is not an industry built for a 47-year-old woman.

A: It wasn't an industry built for when I turned 30.

Q: Is that daunting?

A: No, because I'm smart – I'm not stupid. Meaning that I would never put a record out to try to compete with the 5-year-olds out here. You know what my dream is? With the music that I'm writing, my dream is to create my own musical. My superpower is being able to tell stories through songs – stories that grab your heart and your soul and your balls. I'm not trying to chase what I had years ago. I want to have a baby. And I want to keep creating singular moments like "Sunset Boulevard."

Q: We are in something of a theater-kid moment. You think of Ariana Grande in "Wicked" or Lady Gaga in "A Star Is Born."

A: I'll never forget when Gaga was opening for the Pussycat Dolls on tour. She didn't have a set or anything, so sometimes she would do her transitions and just fall to the floor as if we didn't see her. We're like, "You're laying on the floor – we see you." Then she'd come up as if we were in a new world. It didn't make any sense, but it made complete sense to her. And it actually made sense to me.

I used to say to my team, "I want the Dolls to be more theatrical because this is where I come from." Gaga's telling a story – she's taking people on a journey. And they would be like, "We don't do skits." Robin said that: "You're not gonna do skits." But I was coming from a youth performing arts school where I was in a French play and then "A Cambodian Odyssey," about the Khmer Rouge. I was 14, and that was my introduction into the arts. Bringing these worlds together, it's what I'm here for.

Nicole Scherzinger performs onstage during the TIME100 Summit at Jazz at Lincoln Center on April 23 in New York.
Jemal Countess / TIME / Getty Images / TNS

BOOKS

Judd Apatow is in a constant state of fight or flight

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

There are many books in the production offices of Judd Apatow – bookshelves full of books in rooms full of bookshelves. All sorts of books. Biographies, photo books, children's books, essays, stories. Has he read them? "So little," he says. "But as long you buy them, that's 90 percent of it. As long as I have a lot of books, I'm immortal – you can't leave the Earth when you have more books to read."

Apatow has a new book of his own, "Comedy Nerd," following the interview collections "Sick in the Head" and "Sicker in the Head." It's a thick, glossy, photo-filled, endlessly browsable scrapbook that covers the entirety of a life and career – from fanboy to mogul, as writer, director and producer – that shaped 21st century comedy, encompassing the highlights, the lowlights and the never-lit. (Apatow's profits after expenses go to Fire Aid, helping those affected by the January wildfires, and the literacy charity 826 National.)

You've just finished a documentary on Mel Brooks, with your partner Michael Bonfiglio , and you're working on another about Norm Macdonald. Did they whet your whistle for the book?

I love having the opportunity to tell the story of these people's careers but, more important, their lives. Mel Brooks is the reason why so many of us went into comedy, is why young Jewish boys thought it was possible to get into show business. So to get to talk to him for 10 hours about what it felt like to be Mel Brooks, what was it like to be in World War II and then become a good TV writer and struggle in Hollywood and then figure out your approach to comedy.

I was a big fan of this "Saturday Night Live" scrapbook when I was a kid, because I loved the show and wanted to know more. It had scripts and behind-the-scenes photos and little notes and gave you a sense of how it was made. And I also made one about the Marx brothers. And I thought, "I think I have enough stuff like that to put together a book about comedy obsession."

Did that obsession make you an outlier among your childhood peers?

It was the glory days of comedy – "Saturday Night Live," Monty Python, "SCTV," Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Carol Burnett – but there wasn't anybody at school who wanted to talk about it with me. But that also made me feel I might be able to get a job in this industry because it didn't feel like there was any competition whatsoever. I think it was also connected to learning about alternative music and thinking that the bands that didn't have very many fans were better and loving them for that. Being into "SCTV" felt like being into the Replacements.

Did you have a vision of what that world was like?

I don't think I did. On one level I dreamed of being a stand-up comedian like Jerry Seinfeld or Garry Shandling. I was really scared to admit that and to get on stage and attempt it. I wasn't watching movies thinking I was gong to make movies. I wasn't someone who was looking at the coverage and wondering what type of lens they used. I just liked the movies. I had this vague sense of maybe I could be a comedian, maybe I could be an actor, probably in the back of my head I wondered, "How do you become Bill Murray?" I didn't have that level of confidence myself. But I did get onstage at the end of 12th grade; even though what I was doing was awful, I did begin the process of trying to figure it out. When I interviewed comedians for my high school radio station they all said it takes a while. And I thought, "It's OK to be terrible at this for a year." And I was excited that I was in the terrible stage. I thought, "It's begun."

Reynaud Julien / Abaca via ZUMA Press / TNS

Judd Apatow attending the screening of the movie "You Had to Be There: How the Toronto Godspell Ignited the Comedy Revolution," ahead of Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in Toronto, Canada on Sept. 6.

Did you learn anything new about yourself going through all this stuff?

Making the book I thought, "Was it healthy or unhealthy to work this much?" I'm trying to entertain and tell stories and make work that is meaningful to people, and on another level just trying to fill some insecure hole with accomplishment. I definitely put a lot of energy into trying to succeed as a way of feeling safe: Life won't fall apart if I just do a good job on this. There was definitely the thought that this is work of a crazy person. He needed to take a nap and slow down. So I was both proud and embarrassed. It felt like a form of mania on some level.

Your commentary does give a picture of your psychic journey, not just "And then I made …"

So much of it was driven by the fact that I loved comedy and people who were in the world of comedy. For a long time it was, "Can I be funny enough that those people would allow me to be in the same room as them?" I realized writing the book that the great part of all of it was the collaboration; when you're in the middle of things, you're worried about making a living and your career and taking care of your family. But when you look back, you go, "This was so fun because we all did it together." When I look now, I'll just think, look how hilarious Kathryn Hahn is in "Step Brothers" or how funny Kumail Nanjiani is in "The Big Sick." We put in so much effort, and it's amazing some of them are what we wanted them to be and people liked them.

When I was a kid I was so into "Saturday Night Live" and "SCTV" and Monty Python, I must have thought, "It would be nice to have a crew." Without even realizing it, I was trying to assemble families. So when "Freaks and Geeks" ended, which was really devastating, I tried to roll it into "Undeclared," and when that was canceled I tried to roll it into the movies. The saddest part of show business is that when a project ends, everyone goes their separate ways. I probably as a child of divorce wanted to keep the groups together as long as I could.

You seem to have included everything you've been a part of here.

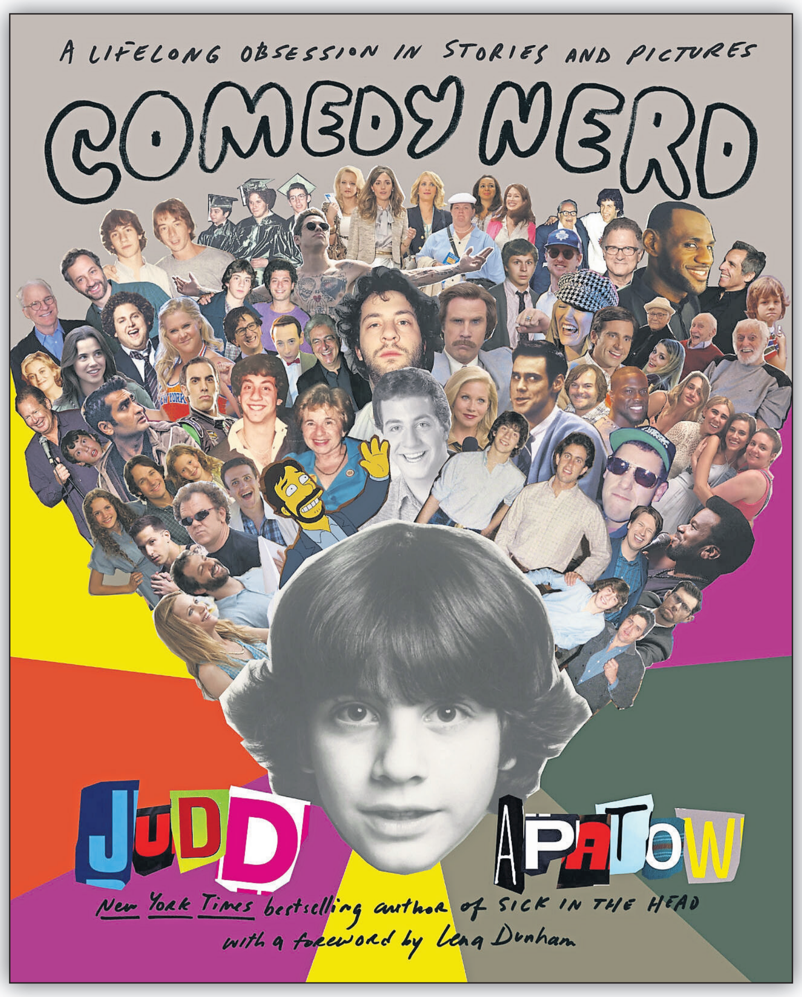
I tried to put all the failures in too so I could tell the story of how things fall apart. But "Walk Hard" opened to $2.9 million for the weekend and 15 years later it's the one a lot of people mention first. [Editor's note: The movie opened to $4.1 million.] You suffer when "The Cable Guy" doesn't do well at the box office and some of the reviews are pretty rough, but 30 years later they're putting out a new version on Blu-ray because people are still into it. And the opposite is also true – certain things you like you realize no one's ever mentioned them to you. But all the projects were done with passion and the hope they would be creatively successful. You know that something didn't work when you see it on DirecTV and feel bad for the people watching it. There's not too many of those.

When I first met you, toward the end of "Freaks and Geeks," you were simultaneously protecting this group of young actors and writers and yelling at executives on the phone – you had a business side and a summer camp side.

That's something that's helped me – because I'm very hypervigilant, all my mental health issues are about being in a constant state of fight or flight. I'm always looking for a problem to solve. I always think that if I'm not on it, things are going to fall apart. Which is a good way to be if you're a producer, but not as a human being. Because it consumes you. It's hard to be present in the moment. The hard part's learning how to switch gears – trying to be funny when you're in a bad mood from the business call you just had to deal with. If you know you're about to be canceled it's hard to go into the other room and punch up the scripts.

How did it feel to see the book all together?

I was really, really happy with it. There's a part of me that just thinks, "Does anybody really care about any of this?" But I try to remind myself that when I was young this is the type of book I wished existed. There's the instructional aspect, script pages and notes from the studio, and there's the personal journey of having a life while attempting to do this work. Most of it is about hard work and patience. It takes a while to become good, and you have to be the hardest worker, and you have to be willing to take massive risks. Everything about comedy is an experiment; there's no way to know anything's going to work. It's just a giant shot in the dark, and instinct.



Penguin Random House / TNS

BESTSELLERS

Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Oct. 25, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.

Hardcover fiction

1. The Widow. John Grisham. Doubleday
2. The Proving Ground. Michael Connelly. Little, Brown
3. The Things Gods Break. Abigail Owen. Red Tower
4. The Secret of Secrets. Dan Brown. Doubleday
5. Remain. Sparks/Shyamalan. Random House
6. Alchemised. SenLinYu. Del Rey
7. Gone Before Goodbye. Witherspoon/Coben. Grand Central
8. Always Remember. Charlie Mackesy. Penguin Life
9. The Intruder. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
10. Twice. Mitch Albom. Harper

Hardcover nonfiction

1. Nobody's Girl. Virginia Roberts Giuffre. Knopf
2. The Let Them Theory. Mel Robbins. Hay House
3. To Rescue the American Spirit. Bret Baier. Mariner
4. 1929. Andrew Ross Sorkin. Viking
5. Measure with Your Heart. Hannah Taylor. Clarkson Potter
6. The Promise of Heaven. David Jeremiah. Thomas Nelson
7. Under Siege. Eric Trump. Threshold
8. How to Test Negative for Stupid. John Kennedy. Broadside
9. Delivering the Wow. Richard Fain. Fast Company
10. Giving Up Is Unforgivable. Joyce Vance. Dutton

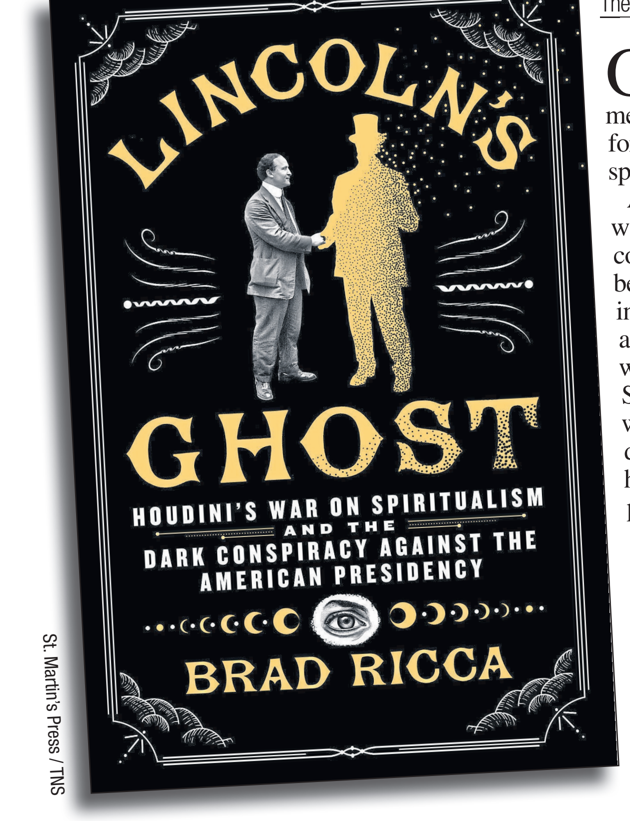
Trade paperback

1. Good Spirits. B.K. Borison. Avon
2. Mate. Ali Hazelwood. Berkley
3. Merry Christmas, You Filthy Animal. Meghan Quinn. Bloom
4. The Mad Wife. Meagan Church. Sourcebooks Landmark
5. Secret Haven. Catherine Cowles. Sourcebooks Casablanca
6. The Surrogate Mother. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
7. The Gingerbread Bakery. Laurie Gilmore. HarperCollins
8. My Hero Academia, Vol. 42. Kohei Horikoshi. Viz
9. The Tenant. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
10. Caught Up. Navessa Allen. Slowburn

Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.

REVIEW

Book uncovers Harry Houdini's war on fake spiritualists



St. Martin's Press / TNS

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

On a Friday evening in July 1925, about 30 people crowded into a basement on West 88th Street in Manhattan for a presentation by Mrs. Cecil Cook, a spirit medium.

A pan of water and two silver trumpets were placed on a table beside her. After collecting a $1 donation from each member of the audience and leading them in a hymn, Cook turned off the lights and helped an elderly gentleman and a woman connect with deceased relatives. Suddenly, a beam of light revealed Cook with her lips held to the trumpet. A decrepit-looking man stood up, tore off his wig, brandished his flashlight and proclaimed, "I am Houdini."

In "Lincoln's Ghost," Brad Ricca – the author of, among other books, "Mrs. Sherlock Holmes" – draws on episodes like this one and Houdini's testimony to Congress to tell the story of the great magician's war on the lucrative business of fortune-telling and seances, which purported to relay messages to departed loved ones.

Often engaging and informative, "Lincoln's Ghost" is a flawed book. Houdini, Ricca reveals, had great respect for Abraham Lincoln and was interested in the president's premonitions and in reports that John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, was not killed by a Union soldier on April 26, 1865. But "Lincoln's Ghost" has little to say about these subjects or "the dark conspiracy against the American presidency," as its subtitle promises.

Alas, Ricca also recycles speculation – including, for example, claims that Harry and Bess Houdini were childless because she was "intersex."

Alarmingly, in notes at the end of his book, Ricca makes what readers should take as a troubling acknowledgment: "In certain spots I have characterized certain scenes and even, in a few spots, dialogue that I have taken from other sources of the same speaker or imagined around facts."

That said, Ricca is a gifted storyteller, and "Lincoln's Ghost" is at its best when he provides vignettes that illuminate the beliefs and practices of his subjects.

Hired as a teenager because of her quick wit and logic, Rose Mackenberg, Houdini's "right-hand gal," confessed after her mentor died that she used three disguises "to break up the phony spook racket": a naive country girl; a wealthy woman who would pay plenty of money to get advice from a loved one; and a dimwit, ripe for exploitation. What she learned, Rose told a friend, was that "as long as people have troubles, mediums will have business."

The great Houdini, Ricca writes, often told a story about a July 4 party when the skies darkened and rain poured down, just before fireworks were set to explode. An 8-year-old boy asked Houdini whether he could make the rain stop.

"Why certainly," Houdini replied. He repeated his command three times, the skies cleared, and the children cheered. When the boy suggested it would have stopped anyway, Houdini addressed the lord of the heavens again and another downpour commenced.

It was, Houdini recalled, "the most remarkable coincidence that ever happened to a mortal man." But he realized he could never convince his audience that he didn't possess supernatural powers.

"Spiritualism had proven false to him," Ricca writes, "and even though he dismissed coincidence as aimless chance, it was at times such glorious, impossible chance that it might as well be magic because who could really tell."

Little Nell, left, a sculpture of the character from Charles Dickens's "The Old Curiosity Shop," is displayed at the Boston Athenaeum on Oct. 9 in Boston. Photos by Charles Krupa / AP

Historic libraries bring modern comfort to book lovers, history buffs in New England

By LEAH WILLINGHAM and KIMBERLEE KRUESI
Associated Press

BOSTON — When David Arsenault takes down a worn, leather-bound 19th-century book from the winding shelves of the Boston Athenaeum, he feels a sense of awe – like he's handling an artifact in a museum.

Many of the half a million books that line the library's seemingly endless maze of reading room shelves and stacks were printed before his great-great-grandparents were born. Among fraying copies of Charles Dickens novels, Civil War-era biographies and town genealogies, everything has a history and a heartbeat.

"It almost feels like you shouldn't be able to take the books out of the building, it feels so special," said Arsenault, who visits the institution adjacent to Boston Common a few times a week. "You do feel like, and in a lot of ways, you are, in a museum – but it's a museum you get to not feel like you're a visitor in all the time, but really a part of."

The more than 200-year-old institution is one of only about 20 member-supported private libraries in the U.S. dating back to the 18th- and 19th-centuries. Called athenaeums, a Greek word meaning "temple of Athena," the concept predates the traditional public library most Americans recognize today. The institutions were built by merchants, doctors, writers, lawyers and ministers who wanted to not only create institutions for reading – then an expensive and difficult-to-access hobby – but also space to explore culture and debate.

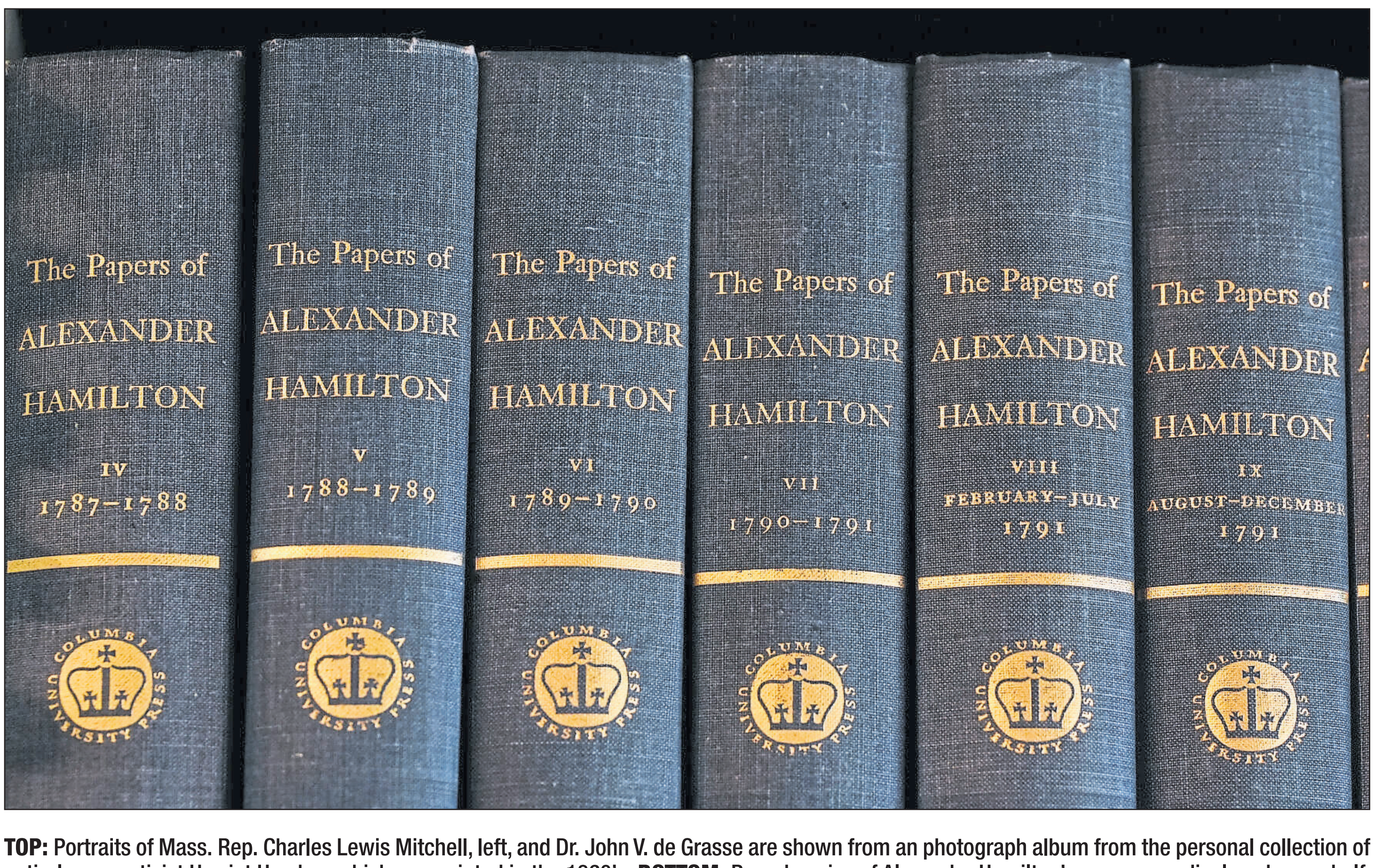
Many of these athenaeums still play a vibrant role in their communities.

Patrons gather to play games, join discussions on James Joyce, or even research family history. Others visit to explore some of the nation's most prized artifacts, such as the largest collection from George Washington 's personal library at Mount Vernon at the Boston Athenaeum.

In addition to conservation work, institutions acquire and uplift the work of more modern creatives who may have been overlooked. The Boston Athenaeum recently co-debuted an exhibit by painter Allan Rohan Crite, who died in 2007 and used his canvas to depict the joy of Black life in the city.

One thing binds all athenaeums together: books and people who love them.

"The whole institution is built around housing the books," said Matt Burriesci, executive director of Providence Athenaeum in Rhode Island. "The people who come to this institution really appreciate just holding a book in their hands and reading it the old-fashioned way."



TOP: Portraits of Mass. Rep. Charles Lewis Mitchell, left, and Dr. John V. de Grasse are shown from an photograph album from the personal collection of anti-slavery activist Harriet Hayden, which was printed in the 1860's. **BOTTOM:** Bound copies of Alexander Hamilton's papers are displayed on a shelf.

Book lover's dream

Built to mimic an imposing Greek temple, staffers at the Providence Athenaeum often talk about the joy of watching people enter for the first time.

Visitors must climb a series of cold, granite steps. Only then are they met with a thick wooden door that ushers them into a warm world filled with cozy reading nooks, hidden desks to leave secret messages to fellow patrons, and almost every square inch bursting with books.

"It's the actual time capsule of people's reading habits over 200 years," Burriesci said, while pointing to a first-edition of Little Women, where the pages and spine proudly showcase years of being well read.

Many athenaeums are designed to pay tribute to Greek influence and their namesake, the goddess of wisdom. In Boston, a city once dubbed "the Athens of America," visitors to the athenaeum are greeted by a nearly 7-foot-tall bronze statue of Athena Giustiniani.

The building is as much an art museum as it is a library.

"So many libraries were built to be functional – this library was built to inspire," said John Buchtel, the Boston Athenaeum's curator of rare books and head of special collections.

The 12-level building includes five gallery floors where ornate busts of writers and historical figures decorate reading rooms with wooden tables overlooked by book-lined pathways reachable by spiral and hidden staircases.

Natural light shines in from large windows where guests can look down to see one of Boston's most historic cemeteries where figures like Paul Revere, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock are buried.

"We're able to leave many of these things out for people to peruse, and I think people can often get curious about something and just follow their curiosity into things that they didn't even know that they were going to be fascinated by," said Boston Athenaeum executive director Leah Rosovsky.

A safe haven

When athenaeums were founded, they were exclusive spaces that only people with education and money could access.

Some are now free. Most are open to the public for day passes and tours. Memberships to the Boston Athenaeum can range from $17 to $42 a month per person, depending on whether the patron is under 40 or is sharing the membership with family members.

Charlie Grantham, a wedding photographer and aspiring novelist, said she first visited during one of the institution's annual community days, where the public can explore for free. She said she was surprised by how accessible it was and describes the space as "Boston's best kept secret – an oasis in the middle of the city."

"It's just so peaceful. Even if I'm still working ... doing things I'm stressed out about at home, when I'm here, there's like a stillness about it and things feel more manageable, things feel enjoyable here," she said.

Some people visit every day to work remotely, read or socialize, said Salem Athenaeum executive director Jean Marie Procious.

"We do have a loneliness crisis," she said. "And we want to encourage people to come and see us as a space to meet up with others and a safe environment that you're not expected to buy a drink or buy a meal."

TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

MagicMount Flask is a great on-the-go selfie stand

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Scosche's MagicMount Flask is a multi-function accessory designed to work with the new iPhones or any MagSafe-compatible smartphone.

The flask is available in 22- and 32-ounce sizes and features double-wall vacuum insulation. The insulation will keep your beverages cold for up to 24 hours or hot for 12 hours.

However, the MagicMount Flask MagSafe's real appeal is the adjustable magnetic lid, which is built with powerful Neodymium magnets. You can attach compatible iPhone 12 models and later. A Scosche MagicRing adapter is included to make any phone compatible with MagSafe. The combination is ideal for use most anywhere, including in a car, office, gym or kitchen.

The odor-resistant flask features an interior made of food-grade stainless steel and a powder-coated external finish. There is a quick-flip straw on top of the leak-proof top. For reference, regarding your vehicle's cupholders, the Scosche 32-ounce flask ($44.99) is 3.75 inches wide, and the 22-ounce model ($39.99) is 3.1 inches wide.

When the phone is attached, it is adjustable to any angle, including landscape and portrait angles. The mount allows the MagicMount Flask to serve as an ideal on-the-go selfie stand for capturing still photos or videos. Or use it for hands-free calls.

The cap, which is also sold separately ($29.99), is compatible with other wide mouth water bottles. A complete list is on the Scosche site. The MagicMount Flask magnets are powerful enough to attach and hold a full 40-ounce flask to a magnetic surface.

Your furry friends can also make use of a feature: Remove the protective food-quality silicone sleeve, which protects the base, and use it as a pet water bowl.

scosche.com offers both sizes in black, white, powder blue, and flamingo pink.

LifeStraw water bottles with built-in filter systems offer a cost-effective way to ensure that what you're drinking is safe.

The LifeStraw Go Series 18-ounce tumbler ($49.95) filters water as you sip, providing clean and safe hydration on the go. Its integrated two-stage filter not only removes impurities but also improves the taste of your water and other stored beverages.

Inside the tumbler is a two-stage filter that removes bacteria (including E. coli and Salmonella), parasites and microplastics, while also reducing the chlorine level. The filter system includes a membrane microfilter that also removes sand and dirt. The activated carbon filter reduces chlorine and also helps eliminate odors.

LifeStraw lists the membrane microfilter to last for up to 1,000 gallons, or approximately five years of daily use. The carbon filter will last for up to 26 gallons, about two months. Replacement carbon filters are available in packs of 2 ($9.95) and 6 ($24.95). Replacement membrane microfilters are $24.95.

The tumbler has a slim profile to fit in vehicle cup holders – the 18-ounce model has a 3.4-inch diameter.

LifeStraw offers a range of filtered products to ensure the safety of what you're drinking. They also state that for every product sold, a child in need receives access to safe water for an entire year.

The LifeStraw Go Series features stainless steel tumblers, available in 18 ounces ($49.95), 24 ounces ($59.95) and 1 liter ($64.95). All the sizes are available in a variety of color choices. The stainless steel tumblers have a top-sided carry clip.

https://lifestraw.com/

Contact Gregg Ellman at gregg ellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

LifeStraw water bottles with built-in filter systems offer a cost-effective way to ensure that what you're drinking is safe.
LifeStraw / TNS

TECH REVIEW

New Eufy smart lock is a palm reader

The Eufy FamiLock S3 Max.
Eufy / TNS

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

It was Arthur C. Clark who said, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

I think about that saying whenever I run across a gadget that really impresses me with a particular feature.

For the last month or so, I've been testing the Eufy FamiLock S3 Max smart lock for my front door. The Familock S3 Max ($399.99, eufy.com) is one of the new smart locks from Eufy that utilizes palm vein unlocking, which is just magical when you use it.

When I walk up to my front door, I hold out my palm about four inches above the lock for about one second, then by the time I reach down to turn the knob, the door is open.

Eufy says palm vein reading is much more accurate and easier to use than using a fingerprint sensor. I believe it.

The S3 Max also can unlock by entering a code on the keypad or through the Eufy app on your smartphone. Lastly, it does come with an actual key you can use to unlock the door.

This lock also works with most smart home automation systems including Apple Home, Google Home, Alexa and SmartThings. It also supports Matter.

The S3 Max is powered by a 15,000 milliamp-hour rechargeable battery, which can power the lock for several months. The main battery can recharge via USB-C in just a few hours but it has to come out of the lock to recharge. To cover the time when you're recharging, the S3 Max also has four AAA batteries to let you open the door via your code, but it disables some power-hungry features like palm vein unlock and Wi-Fi.

But the S3 is more than a really cool smart lock.

If you look at it, you'll notice it has a camera, and a big button at the bottom that's also a doorbell.

If someone presses the doorbell, you'll get a notification on your phone and you can use the Eufy app to see and speak to the person at the door. The camera shows a head to toe view of the area outside the door with 2K resolution.

But wait … there's more.

The portion of the lock on the inside of your door has a 4-inch video screen to show you the live view of what's on the outside. The screen powers on if the doorbell is pressed, or you can turn it on manually. This is great for people who are not tall enough to look through the peep hole.

You can also call up the camera's view from your phone.

Like other doorbell cameras and security cameras, the S3 Max's camera can send you notifications if it senses motion. The lock can also send you notifications when the door is opened or closed.

One of the features my wife and I like best is the ability of the S3 Max to know when the door is closed and to automatically lock itself after a set amount of time.

We set it to lock within 10 seconds after closing and it was so nice to be able to close the door and walk away knowing it would lock itself.

The palm vein reader is very simple to set up. In the app you add users, set them up with a 4- to 8-digit passcode and then you can read their palms. When the app tells you, just hold your open palm about four inches above the sensor and your unique vein pattern will be registered in just a few seconds. You register both palms, and the vein recognition works even as you age or if your hands are wet or dirty.

The app can keep track of up to 50 users.

You might not realize it, but doors with fingerprint readers have a tough time registering and reading the fingerprints of older people. The S3 Max has no such limitation. Fingerprint readers also have trouble if your fingers are wet or sweaty.

Palm vein recognition worked perfectly – every time.

The S3 Max, because of the doorbell and camera, is designed for doors without a screen door or storm door.

If you do have a screen door or if you already have a video doorbell and you don't have a need for the video screen, Eufy does make other models of smart locks with palm vein recognition without those features.

I also tested the FamiLock E34 ($279.95), which does not have a camera, doorbell or video screen and it is perfect if you have a screen door.

The E34 has the same palm vein unlocking and keypad, as well as physical keys and opening it by holding out your palm is just as magical.

One big functionality difference between the E34 and the S3 Max is how it handles auto locking.

The E34 does not have a sensor to know if the door is open or closed, so the auto locking setting is by time only. We set it to automatically lock one minute after it unlocks, which usually gives us time to open the door, get out and close the door before it locks itself.

On both smart locks, you can press the small shield icon at the bottom right corner of the keypad to immediately lock the door.

Conclusions

I think everyone could benefit from a smart lock for their doors. I can't remember the last time I had to use a key to get into my front door.

Each new generation of smart locks brings new conveniences, and the palm vein unlocking is what should get your attention.

I thought fingerprint readers would be the big thing, but I can't tell you how often my wife had to repeatedly press her finger on our previous smart lock. There were many swear words. It worked fine for me, but not her.

She and I are 100 percent happy with the S3 Max and the E34. Palm vein recognition is indeed magic.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.

Should you use a VPN all the time?

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

This week's reader question is about VPN: "I have used VPN in the past provided by my university, but that was just for overseas access from China. Since retiring, I no longer have access to that service. Considering the way we are being tracked these days, is a private subscription worth it? Any downsides? I'd appreciate your opinion."

Great question.

First, let's discuss VPN and why you'd want to use it.

VPN stands for virtual private network, which is an added layer of security for your internet connection, both at home and on the road.

You certainly want to keep your internet traffic out of the prying eyes of hackers, but what about other entities that can see (and track) your online activities, like your internet service provider, advertisers, your browser manufacturer and websites you visit?

They can (and do) collect as much data about your internet activity as they can. Using a VPN is something you can do to minimize that tracking.

Consumer VPN is software that encrypts all your incoming and outgoing internet traffic through a secured server. It is a very secure way to surf the internet, but it can slow things down.

You may have used a business VPN at work. At the university where I work, we use VPN to make secure connections inside our network from the outside world. I have to connect to the university VPN system to access the servers and computers on our network if I'm working from home.

If you start researching VPN, you'll find some are free and some charge a monthly or annual subscription.

I don't think I'd trust my personal information to a free VPN. I don't have a specific subscription VPN to recommend. You'll need to do some research.

There are other reasons to use a VPN. One of the features offered by most better VPN services is to mask a user's location.

When you use the VPN service, you can connect to a server in a city in another area of the U.S or other part of the world. This is useful if you subscribe to a service like NFL Sunday Ticket or MLB.TV and want to watch games that might normally be blacked out in your area.

Also, streaming services like Netflix offer different content in other countries. You can explore those offerings by connecting to a VPN server in those countries. I'm not advocating using VPN to circumvent any subscriber agreements you may have with your streaming services, but it does happen.

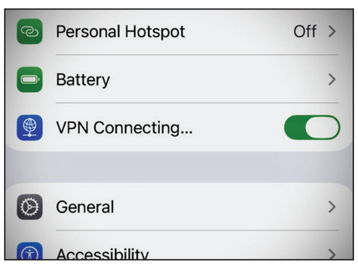
As to whether you need to use one and should you use it all the time? You might want to, but I don't use a VPN at home. I think my home network is secure enough and I disable tracking as much as I can.

The places I'd be most tempted to use VPN would be on public Wi-Fi networks, and I stopped using public Wi-Fi when I started using my phone's hotspot connection when I need to get online from outside my house.

Some people like more security, and that's not a bad thing. If you told me you always use a VPN and you're happy, then I'm happy.

You might want to try one and see how you like it.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.



Jim Rossman / TNS

A VPN connecting screen on iOS 26.

HOME & GARDEN

DESIGN RECIPES

A CASE FOR NEUTRALS

By CATHY HOBBS
Tribune News Service (TNS)

When looking to infuse a sense of timelessness into your home décor, one simply can't go wrong with neutrals. Neutral colors remain one of the biggest design trends. Neutrals can be used to create interiors that are warm and layered and can be used as the cornerstone for sophisticated interiors.

Looking to infuse neutral colors and tones into your home? Here are some top tips.

Start with a foundation

Choose a neutral paint color for larger areas such as walls, flooring or large furniture pieces.

Layer shades

Mix warm and cool neutral, such as beige, taupe, gray and ivory, to create dimension instead of relying on a single flat tone.

Focus on texture

Materials such as bouclé, linen, rattan, stone and wool all add richness and keep neutrals from feel bland or uninspired.

Add natural materials

Textures and materials such as wood, clay and jute pair beautifully with soft tones, grounding the look with an organic feel.

Play with contrast

Pair light neutrals like ivory with deeper shades such as black, charcoal or chocolate brown to create a sharp sense of contrast.

Use metallic accents

Brass, bronze or black finishes bring subtle glam without overpowering the palette.

Let there be light

Neutrals reflect natural light beautifully. Use sheer drapery or strategically placed mirrors to enhance brightness.

Bring in greenery

Plants can be used to help add a sense of calm and a healthy feature.

Add one muted color

Muted tones can be layered into a neutral room to help add depth and interest.

Invest in timeless pieces

Neutrals colors are timeless. Invest in larger pieces in neutral tones and update the look easily with seasonal accessories.

Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."

Handout / TNS

TOP: A modern living spaces is created by layering various neutral tones of cream and gray. **ABOVE:** Neutral cream is paired with black accents to create a subtle sense of contrast.

Scott Gabriel Morris

A neutral interior can provide a sense of modernity and freshness.

What are pros and cons of ceramic tile?

Angie Hicks
Ask Angi

If you're looking for a flooring material that checks nearly every box on durability, affordability and design, ceramic tile easily comes to mind.

It's been a classic choice for hundreds of years, and with good reason. Ceramic tile doesn't just hold up under the daily grind, but thrives on it. A well-installed and well-maintained tile floor can last 20 years at minimum, and in some cases, people are still walking on tile that's been in place for a century. That's staying power most other materials can't claim.

The appeal of ceramic tile isn't just about numbers and lifespan. It's about the sheer variety you can put on your floors. From polished neutrals to bold mosaics to tiles designed to look like wood or marble, ceramic tile can be as understated or as dramatic as you want it to be. Advances in printing technology have turned ceramic into a chameleon of flooring options, giving you near-limitless design flexibility.

Functionally, ceramic has plenty of advantages as well. It's nearly impervious to water once sealed properly, which explains why you see it in kitchens, bathrooms, mudrooms and entryways. In warmer climates, it often makes its way into living areas and even bedrooms. The smooth, nonporous surface makes it resistant to allergens such as dust, pollen and mold, which is welcome news for anyone in the household with asthma or seasonal sensitivities. And when it comes to cleanup, tile is about as low-maintenance as it gets. A sweep and a mop usually handle the worst of spills, and it doesn't soak up stains the way wood or carpet might.

Joy Fera / TNS

A well-installed and well-maintained tile floor can last 20 years at minimum.

But of course, no flooring option is without its drawbacks, and ceramic has a few that are worth thinking about before you commit. The biggest maintenance task with ceramic tile isn't the tile itself, but rather the grout. Those thin lines between tiles can absorb moisture, stain or even harbor mold if not sealed and resealed on a regular basis. Most people assume a one-time seal is good enough, but experts recommend resealing annually to keep grout in peak condition. Skip this step, and you may find yourself scrubbing grout lines more often than you'd like.

Comfort is another tradeoff. Ceramic tile is notoriously hard underfoot, which is both a blessing and a curse. On the plus side, it doesn't dent or warp easily. On the downside, if you're standing at the sink or stove for an hour, you'll probably feel it in your legs. And in the winter, ceramic tile can feel like stepping onto an ice cube. Area rugs and cushioned mats go a long way toward softening the experience, but you'll want to think carefully about where in the house you place it.

Tile's hardness also means it's less forgiving to your belongings. Drop a plate or a wineglass, and odds are you'll be sweeping up shards instead of setting it back in the cupboard. And while ceramic is tough, it's not indestructible. A hard enough impact can crack a tile, and while replacing one or two tiles is doable, it's still a hassle.

Another consideration is safety. The smooth surface of ceramic tile can become slippery when wet, especially in bathrooms and kitchens. Some homeowners solve this by choosing textured tiles that offer a little more grip, but texture also tends to trap dirt, which means more scrubbing.

Alternatives exist if ceramic tile doesn't feel like the perfect match. Porcelain is denser, stronger and more water-resistant, though usually more expensive and harder to install. Natural stone provides a unique and luxurious look, though it comes at a higher price point and often requires more upkeep. Vinyl and laminate tiles mimic the look of ceramic or stone at a lower cost, and wood offers classic warmth, though it demands more maintenance.

Cost-wise, ceramic tile is generally friendly to your budget. You can expect to pay around $2 to $10 per square foot for the tile itself, with installation running between $1,300 and $7,500 for a typical project. High-end or custom tile can climb higher, but most homeowners find that ceramic tile provides a sweet spot of value compared to stone or hardwood. It's also more forgiving to the DIY crowd than porcelain or natural stone, although you'll still need plenty of patience and the right tools if you decide to tackle it yourself.

At the end of the day, ceramic tile represents one of the most balanced flooring options available. If the tradeoffs don't bother you, ceramic tile can be a floor that looks great, performs reliably and potentially lasts longer than you'll own your home.

Paxton Media Group

Travel

E-edition EXTRA

Brady MacDonald / Orange County Register / TNS

"Walt Disney – A Magical Life," featuring an Audio-Animatronic representation of the visionary Disneyland founder, opened May 16 as part of the park's 70th anniversary celebration.

In Orlando theme parks, animatronics increase in number – *and in realism*

By DEWAYNE BEVIL
Orlando Sentinel (TNS)

Mechanical birds, bears and princesses have chirped, growled and sung in Orlando's theme parks for more than 50 years. The animatronic trend shows no signs of fading, as new figures arrive in new places at Walt Disney World, and Epic Universe introduces batches of lifelike characters.

The additions range from a planned electronic version of Walt Disney at Magic Kingdom to a lumbering Frankenstein's monster figure that debuted with Epic in May.

"People still enjoy seeing lifelike figures of their heroes, villains and others come alive," said Dennis Speigel, CEO of International Theme Park Services. "I think this is one area that continues to evolve, and I don't think we've seen anything yet."

Technological advances are enabling the improved illusion of the figures, said Brian Ott, show systems studio executive with Walt Disney Imagineering.

"The way that we can now simulate, the way that we now design, the way that we now can generate content for these and in style – like it is moving like the character that everybody sees and recognizes from the film … I think that's really the appeal of like, 'Wow, not only did I see Elsa on the ride, but I felt like it was Elsa. It moved, it performed, it looked at me,'" Ott said.

The next new animatronic at Disney World will be Benjamin Clawhauser, a cheetah character that's part of the "Zootopia: Better Zoogether" show launching at Disney's Animal Kingdom theme park on Nov. 7.

"You will see something new and unique from that figure," Ott said.

Other planned figures include Buddy, a support-bot, in the ongoing update for Buzz Lightyear's Space Rangers Spin at Magic Kingdom; Scooter and other Muppets in the retheming of Rock 'n' Roller Coaster at Disney's Hollywood Studios; facelifts for Frozen Ever After figures at Epcot; and the addition of Walt Disney himself at the beginning of Carousel of Progress at Magic Kingdom.

These come on the heels of the first animatronic to represent Walt Disney, which debuted at Disneyland in California this summer.

"I think that has breathed a lot of life back into the animatronics and from the highest level," Speigel said.

Figures frightening, formidable

Universal Orlando installed animatronics inside Epic Universe's Wizarding World of Harry Potter – Ministry of Magic, Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment ride and elsewhere.

"Everyone has their normal lives that they're going through, and that comes with people wanting to be transported," said Gregory Hall, assistant director, creative design for Universal Creative. "We have the opportunity to bring new technology and use it for good and use it to entertain and inspire people."

The Monsters Unchained ride is peppered with figures in action, including Dracula, Mummy and the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

A crowd-pleasing scene happens in the Unchained preshow with new character Victoria Frankenstein and Frankenstein's monster, who strides into the room. It's a moment that prompts applause from Epic visitors, Hall said.

"That was the first time we made a figure on that scale walk," Hall said. "And then he's right next to Victoria, and they're using extremely different technology."

Another big animatronic project was the "erumpent," a charging beast in the Harry Potter and the Battle at the Ministry ride.

"We're really all about, how do we get the fastest, smoothest motion moving this giant thing?" said Anisha Vyas, director of projects for Universal Creative. "It needs to be really visceral. It needs to move really fast. It needs to be moving really fluid," she said. "Getting it to move and stop is not hard. Getting it to look pretty and gorgeous and realistic? That's hard."

And the motion must be repeated for each load of passengers.

"We ensure every guest has the same experience," Vyas said.

It all started with a bird?

The seed for Disney's animatronics – the company trademarked the term "Audio-Animatronics" in the 1960s – goes back to Walt and Lillian Disney's purchase of a miniature caged-bird decoration that tweeted. That eventually led to Enchanted Tiki Room attractions such as the one at Magic Kingdom, which opened with the park in 1971.

Animatronics got a major boost from "Great Moments With Mr. Lincoln," developed by Disney for the 1964 World's Fair in New York. Guests watched the faux former president give a speech, and Speigel witnessed this on a high-school trip to the event.

"When he put his arms on that chair and he stood up and talked, the whole audience, I remember, just gasped," he said.

The 1960s technology propelled the show's status, said Bob Rogers, chairman of BRC Imagination Arts. Otherwise, it might have been forgotten quickly, he said.

"The fact that it was just a robot, not a human, was the charm," Rogers said.

Waiting for Walt

Fast-forward to 2025 and the installation of the Walt Disney animatronic at Disneyland. "Walt Disney – A Magical Life" is temporarily taking the place of the Lincoln animatronic presentation there. Some fans have criticized the look of the new figure.

"It looks fine to me from a distance," said Jeremiah Good, the Florida correspondent for LaughingPlace.com. "But people that were there for the opening that were in the front row filming every bit of it were going 'That doesn't look a thing like Walt.'"

Critics are more forgiving about animatronic looks for animated beings as opposed to actual humans, Good said. He awaits the Walt Disney figure slated to join Carousel of Progress next year.

"That is supposed to be a little bit older of a Walt, so that'll be interesting to see," Good said.

"I think there are some opportunities there for the point in Walt's life," said Imagineering's Ott, who noted that Florida's animatronic would be seen in shorter but more frequent bursts at Magic Kingdom than its counterpart in California. "I also think there are things just logistically about the run time of shows – if you just look at the run time of the Disneyland, the frequency of that show, versus something like Carousel of Progress that is cycling through."

Tech talk

After pneumatic and hydraulic phases, animatronics are now settling into an all-electric era with computerized programming.

Last year, Walt Disney Imagineering gave a public peek into the process with an episode of "We Call It Imagineering" on YouTube. This preceded the debut of figures for Tiana's Bayou Adventure, the retheming of Splash Mountain at both Magic Kingdom and Disneyland.

A big challenge was the development of Louis, the trumpet-toting alligator, considered one of WDI's largest and most dynamic figures.

"There's a lot of moving parts. "So you have all of these layers, you've got fabric and it all has to be in sync," said Sonny Chapman, principal illusion maker, in the episode. Louis' big belly, upper torso and arms must work together with the costuming, all while he's bouncing, looking happy and blinking.

Imagineering has expanded into "stuntronics," creating figures that can perform elaborate aerial acrobatic feats, including one dressed as Spider-Man at Disney California Adventure theme park. The company has also developed knee-high DBX droids, which made appearances at Disney's Hollywood Studios this summer.

"They're wonderful not just because they're robots, but because they are animated and they are written with stories." Rogers said. "They express emotions. They're doing things. They get frustrated when they can't do what they're trying to do. … That's just wonderful."

Animatronics have proven, multi-generational staying power.

"A lot of our engineers went to school just to work on animated figures. … That's their thing," Hall said. "They're studying their whole lives, and they make their entire lives, and it's time for their generation to show the next generation how to pass the baton. This is one of those moments that's even bigger than just (theme) parks."

Vyas points to their entertainment value.

"I just think they bring so much life to the environment," she said. "I absolutely love that at Epic Universe we've doubled down on that. I really think that it just takes it to the next level."

TRAVEL TIPS

Priceline unveils biggest 2026 travel trends

Priceline has published its 2026 Where to Next? Travel Trends Report, surveying travelers and analyzing booking data to identify seven emerging travel trends for the year ahead.

"Travel in 2026 is a blend of impulse and intention. Priceline's latest research reveals a shift toward more spontaneous trips, new regional exploration, and travelers who are increasingly steering their own journeys—from Gen Z revisiting nostalgic destinations to parents letting Gen Alpha lead the way," Lesley Klein, SVP, Strategy and Brand Marketing, Priceline, said in a statement.

"Combined with the growing role of AI-powered planning, these trends point to a traveler who's changing the playbook on how, when, and why they go."

According to Priceline research, travelers expect to spend an average of 15 days traveling for leisure in 2026 and plan to increase their travel budgets by roughly $350. Much of those days and money will be put toward some interesting trends that the booking platform defines in its latest report.

Little Treat Travel

According to Priceline, 2026 will see more travelers turn small indulgences into big adventures, with many Americans booking last-minute getaways for no particular occasion. Hence the phrase "little treat travel."

Nearly two-thirds of travelers (65 percent), including Gen Z, say they've booked a trip purely as a treat to lift their spirits.

Midwest Quests

Interest in exploring the Midwest is on the rise thanks to the region's quirky attractions, charming small towns, and bustling big cities. Priceline found that 63 percent of travelers say they're more interested in visiting the Midwest than they used to be.

Home to Route 66, the Midwest promises to be a popular road trip destination in 2026.

DéjàView

Priceline also identified the DéjàView as one to watch for 2026, with many Millennial and Gen Z travelers "turning nostalgia into their next itinerary."

Seventy-three percent of travelers surveyed indicated that they're drawn to trips that help them reconnect with their past. What's more, 82 percent of younger travelers can't wait to return to childhood favorites.

The list of popular DéjàView destinations includes family beaches, amusement parks and hometown hangouts.

Expedition Beach

It's anticipated that travelers will add some more adrenaline-pumping adventures to their beach vacations in the year to come. According to Priceline's research, three-quarters of travelers (74 percent) are seeking beaches that excite rather than just relax.

The Expedition Beach trend will see a rise in exotic, adventure-ready shorelines that offer travelers much more to do than simply sit back in the sun.

Tailgate Tourism

College towns across the U.S. are gaining momentum as they become must-visit destinations for tailgating premier football matchups in addition to the events and experiences that surround them, from live music to mouthwatering food.

Nearly two-thirds of travelers say they'd love to visit a college town, with 70 percent of Gen Z and Millennials saying they would go just to experience the energy of game day.

Kidfluence

When it comes to family getaways, kids are gaining more influence. Eighty-seven percent of surveyed parents say their kids help choose and plan the trip.

It appears that Gen Alpha has some thoughts, so watch for families to target accommodations and destinations that appeal to America's youngest population.

Dead Zoning

Expect travelers to truly embrace digital detoxing in 2026, trading in Slack messages and Zoom calls for a real break from the day-to-day grind.

Priceline found that nearly six in 10 travelers (59 percent) say they're setting stronger boundaries with work during vacations and are choosing destinations that make unplugging easy.

"Travelers are rewriting the rules of vacationing and it's clear they're driven by emotion as much as exploration," Christina Bennett, Priceline Consumer Travel Trends Expert, said in a statement. "From the rise of 'Little Treat Travel' to the nostalgia of 'DéjàView,' 2026 is about balance: finding both excitement and comfort in how and where we travel."

"The data shows that people aren't waiting for the perfect time to go—they're creating it," said Bennett.

By Patrick Clarke / TravelPulse (TNS)

Photos by Swain County Tourism Development Authority / TNS

Pictured is the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad. The 44-mile excursion is a four-and-a-half-hour trip (including a stopover at the Nantahala Outdoor Center). The scenery from your car's window is breathtaking – the Nantahala River and along the shore of Fontana Lake before crossing the 426-foot Fontana Trestle into the Nantahala Gorge.

Relaxed, *reinvigorated* after Smoky Mountains trip

By PATTI NICKELL
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Mark Van Osdal is a tree whisperer. Owner of Carolina Bound Adventures, he is leading a small group of us on the Deep Creek hike on the North Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park near Bryson City.

During the hike, we will see waterfalls, a picturesque bridge over Deep Creek, the last of the summer wildflowers, and one rather belligerent squirrel, angry that he dropped the black walnut he was munching on right in the middle of our group.

Oh yes, and trees ... lots of them. Van Osdal says that the national park (America's most visited) has some 100 native species of trees, more than the entire European continent. And he appears to be on a first-name basis with all of them.

Van Osdal is just one of the people waiting to welcome visitors to Bryson City, known as "the quiet side of the Smokies." Although just 45 miles from Gatlinburg, across the Tennessee line, it seems a world apart in its peaceful serenity.

And in its welcoming residents who can't wait to make your stay as authentic as possible. People such as Rita Jones, director of the Swain County Visitor Center & Heritage Museum.

Make it your first stop – you can't miss the imposing white-columned building on Everett Street, which doubles as both a resource for visitors seeking the area's best hiking, rafting, canoeing and biking spots and a museum of western Carolina heritage.

And then there's Rita, pink-cheeked and smiling, looking just like the adorable elf she dresses up as during the town's celebrated Christmas festivities.

Make a stop at Nantahala Outdoor Center, starting point for all of the adrenaline-boosting adventures people come here for. If you're lucky, you will meet marketing manager Betsy Bevis and reservations manager Chris Aldridge, who joined me for lunch at the Riverside Restaurant overlooking the Nantahala River.

Munching on my catfish sandwich, I noted that the Nantahala is much more benign from a window table than from an overturned canoe, courtesy of my last experience on it.

The 500-acre NOC is a one-stop shop for all things outdoor – whether it be rafting, mountain biking, zip lining, etc.; eating at one of the two restaurants; buying outdoor gear, or overnighting in the new mountaintop Hemlocks bungalows.

Guests wanting to be closer to the river and trails can book private cabins, and for the truly adventurous, there are primitive campsites within the Nantahala National Forest.

Downtown Bryson City, North Carolina.

Swain County Visitors Center & Heritage Museum.

Fun fact: NOC's founder Payson Kennedy was a stunt double in the film "Deliverance," and if you remember the scenes filmed on the nearby Chattooga River, you'll understand why Burt Reynolds and the other actors were keen to leave the paddling to those stunt doubles.

Although the movie may suggest otherwise, Bevis and Aldridge say the 1971 film was responsible for a surge in the popularity of whitewater rafting.

Back on dry land, you would be fortunate indeed if you crossed paths with Scott Mastej and experienced a dose of his southern hospitality. Along with his partner Ron LaRoque, he is the owner of the Everett Hotel, a luxury 10-room boutique property repurposed from a 1908 bank building.

While I didn't stay at the Everett, I did enjoy a dinner (lobster bisque and Carolina mountain trout) and a conversation with Scott in the chic Everett Bistro, the hotel's in-house restaurant.

Dinner another night was at the historic Fryemont Inn, a Bryson City fixture and a nostalgic trip back to the 1920s, where there are no TVs in most of the rooms and no air conditioning as the mountain breezes provide natural cooling.

This is rustic luxury at its best, with the large fireplace in the lobby and even larger open porch off that lobby competing for favorite guest hangout.

Dinner included an entrée plus choice of soup or salad and two family-style sides of the day.

If you can, track down co-owner Monica Brown, and ask her about the lavish Halloween festivities she organizes where repeat guests return every year for the spooky fun.

Should you opt for a stay in a bed-and-breakfast, you will find a charming one in the Folkestone Inn. Those charms include a serene garden for sipping your morning coffee, the 15-minute driving distance to the Smoky Mountains National Park and innkeeper Toni Rowe's delectable breakfast Croque Madame.

Since I had my two sisters on this trip with me, we opted for one of Bryson City's many cabin accommodations. Our cabin in the Bryson City Village lived up to its name, Creekside Delight.

The two-bedroom, two-bath cabin had a large kitchen/dining area and a large living room with a deck and hot tub overlooking a small creek.

While many visitors prefer a cabin nestled in the mountains, this one had definite advantages, being just a short walk into town and the train depot.

The latter is important as it makes it easy if you book the area's top attraction, the Great Smoky Mountain Railroad Nantahala Gorge Excursion.

The 44-mile excursion is a four-and-a-half-hour trip (including a stopover at the Nantahala Outdoor Center). The scenery from your car's window is breathtaking – the Nantahala River and along the shore of Fontana Lake before crossing the 426-foot Fontana Trestle into the Nantahala Gorge.

The leaves were just starting to turn during my excursion, and I could only imagine what this would look like in peak season, the view a tapestry of gold, orange, scarlet and russet.

If you book a first-class car like Harper, you'll get lunch and a chance to engage with Steven, the personable host.

Finally, there's no better trip-ender than toasting the sun setting behind the mountains with a not-to-be-forgotten experience at Long View Resort.

The Nordic-themed experience features a massage on the deck of the spa, where birdsong was the only music needed to lull me into a semi-slumber as every muscle in my body went along for the ride.

Post-massage, I had only to cross the deck and ease into the hot tub facing the mountains in preparation for my 90-minute sunset soak. To say that this is a transcendental experience is not overstating the case.

The only interruption to my zen-like solitude was the attendant bringing me a glass of ice water and a small charcuterie board to nibble on.

After four days in this part of the Smokies, I left feeling relaxed, reinvigorated and wanting to return soon to this authentic mountain destination.